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BRITISH FANTASY AWARD WINNER: BEST MAGAZINE

# NINA ALLAN

NEW NOVELETTE & A NEW REGULAR COLUMN

JAY O'CONNELL • S.L. NICKERSON • T.R. NAPPER • JULIE C. DAY • SAM J. MILLER



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# INTERFACE

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It is often said that the difference between a reviewer and a critic is that you read the first before you come to the book, and the second afterwards. The Book Zone reviews books and its first responsibility is to you, dear reader. It has to be honest, obviously, but it must also amuse and inform. None of you reads every single book that we review; not every book will be to your taste. But we try to make every review worth reading. And – believe it or not – while a negative review can be highly entertaining, I always try to match reviewers with books that they will enjoy or, at least, be able to write about from an informed perspective.

The speculative fiction market is changing in all sorts of ways and in many respects we are returning to a pre-Gernsback state of affairs. Mainstream writers are no longer afraid to dabble in genre. This is something that has been building since the cinema blockbuster explosion of the seventies threw the nodes into the mainstream, and it is to be welcomed with open arms. We do, however, still need to distinguish between the writers who have an intrinsic grasp of the form and those who view the genre merely as an allegorical prop. The very nature of publishing is changing as well, with self-publishers and even major publishers releasing some books only in an electronic format. The ease of production has resulted in some very feeble writing coming before us, but there are grains to be found in the mountain of chaff. We would be negligent if we ignored them entirely.

It is also vital that we remember that SF is not merely the playground of white male Anglophone writers. There is no gender imbalance among readers and writers (if anything, female readers outnumber males), so there shouldn't be one in reviews. The fact that there is a dichotomy is something that has been explored in greater depth in other venues and it is a problem that involves constant vigilance on my part. I don't always succeed but it is something that I am always aware of. Generally we can only review the books we get sent, but why do we have to chase publishers to get review copies for female writers more than those for male?

I am also attempting to look outside of the Anglo-American tradition. For a genre that supposedly spans the universe, it seems strange that so many of us restrict our reading to material that comes from such a small region. *Science Fiction World* is China's *Interzone* and a decade ago it had an estimated readership of a million. Those readers weren't reading occidental reprints. African SF is increasingly appearing before us, both in English and in translation. And Arabic SF, as Amal El-Mohtar recently pointed out, is now a thing. All of these people, and more, are bringing their own traditions and perspectives to SF and it is all the richer for it.

We haven't the room to review every book that we're sent, but one thing's certain: if we don't have it then we won't be reviewing it. If you're a writer or publisher then you could do a lot worse than send your book to us at the editorial address.

**Jim Steel**



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## **Publisher**

TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane,  
Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB, UK  
w: [ttapress.com](http://ttapress.com)  
e: [interzone@ttapress.com](mailto:interzone@ttapress.com)  
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## **Editor**

Andy Cox  
e: [andy@ttapress.com](mailto:andy@ttapress.com)  
**Assistant Fiction Editor**  
Andy Hedgecock  
**Book Reviews Editor**  
Jim Steel  
e: [jim@ttapress.com](mailto:jim@ttapress.com)  
**Story Proofreader**  
Peter Tennant  
e: [whitenoise@ttapress.com](mailto:whitenoise@ttapress.com)

## **Events**

Roy Gray  
e: [roy@ttapress.com](mailto:roy@ttapress.com)

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**NINA ALLAN**  
*begins a new regular column this issue*



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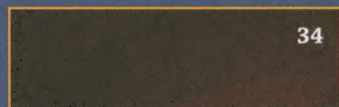
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[rdwagner@centurylink.net](mailto:rdwagner@centurylink.net) (email)



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## ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD

**Loncon 3**, the 2014 World SF Convention held in London's ExCeL centre, was the largest ever Worldcon in terms of registrations sold (10,833) and the second largest for its actual attendance figure of 7,951. With cunning forethought, the huge bleak spaces of the main ExCeL halls used were broken up into a fascinating maze of exhibits, dealer tables and art displays on an upper level, with catering, special-interest tents, a library area and much else in the extensive 'Fan Village' below. This all worked rather well, and – unusually for a British worldcon – the real ale didn't run out. The usual awards were presented...

**Hugos.** Novel: Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*, which had already swept the Clarke, Nebula and others. Novella: Charles Stross, 'Equoid' (Tor.com 9/13). Novelette: Mary Robinette Kowal, 'The Lady Astronaut of Mars', (*Rip-Off!* 2012; this audiobook version deemed ineligible in 2013; maryrobinettekowal.com 2/13). Short: John Chu, 'The Water That Falls on You from Nowhere' (Tor.com 2/13). Dramatic, Long: *Gravity*. Dramatic, Short: *Game of Thrones*, 'The Rains of Castamere'. Related Work: Kameron Hurley, 'We Have Always Fought' (A

*Dribble of Ink* 5/13). Graphic Story: Randall Munroe, 'Time' (xkcd.com). Pro Editor, Long: Ginjer Buchanan. Pro Editor, Short: Ellen Datlow. Pro Artist: Julie Dillon. Semiprozine: *Lightspeed*. Fanzine: *A Dribble of Ink*. Fancast: *SF Signal Podcast*. Fan Writer: Kameron Hurley. Fan Artist: Sarah Webb. John W. Campbell Award: Sofia Samatar.

**Robert Silverberg** greeted me at Loncon with a cheering word: 'Everyone who won a Hugo before me is now dead.'

**As Others See Us.** The Jabberwocky music festival, scheduled simultaneously in the vast Loncon 3 venue, was cancelled. A fan site explained: 'The ExCeL Centre is not a known music space. Not only is it kind of a pain in the arse to get to, but nobody wants to see Nils Frahm in a sparsely populated, untested conference centre with a fucking science-fiction convention next door.' • *The Guardian's* friendlier coverage scored highly on the sf journalism bingo card with 'World Science Fiction Convention 2014 beams into London / Nowt so queer as filk as Loncon at the ExCeL centre allies sci-fi and fantasy...'

**Retro Hugos** for 1938 work. Novel: T.H. White, *The Sword in the Stone*. Novella: John W. Campbell as Don A Stuart, 'Who Goes There?' (*Astounding* 8/38). Novelette: Clifford D. Simak, 'Rule 18' (*Astounding* 7/38). Short: Arthur C. Clarke, 'How We Went to Mars' (*Amateur Science Stories* 3/38). Dramatic: *The War of the Worlds* (radio). Editor: John W. Campbell. Pro Artist: Virgil Finlay. Fanzine: *Imagination!* Fan Writer: Ray Bradbury.

**Future Worldcons.** Next year is Spokane (sasquan.org); in the

2016 site selection at Loncon, a Beijing bid – China's first attempt – lost by a huge margin to Kansas City (midamericon2.org). 2017 bids are Helsinki and Japan; 2018, New Orleans and San José; 2019, Dublin unopposed; 2020, New Zealand.

**Nnedi Okorafor**, on the Afrofuturism panel at Detcon, 'gave an example of how our community has much to learn on such questions, informing us that she had been asked, "You've got Anansi in your book. Did you get that from *American Gods*?"' (*Nice Distinctions*)

**The Weakest Link.** Host: 'Which Irvine Welsh novel features a monologue by a tapeworm?' Contestant: 'Wuthering Heights.' (ITV *The Chase*) • Host: 'It lives in a hutch. Bugs Bunny is one of them.' Contestant: 'An owl?' (Heart FM, Glasgow)

**Life Achievement Awards.** Chesley (art): Jim Burns, who'd thought it was safe to go to a party rather than the Chesleys presentation because he wasn't on the ballot. • First Fandom Hall of Fame: John Clute; posthumous, John Carnell and Walter H. Gillings. • World Fantasy: Ellen Datlow, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro.

**Albus Dumbledore** headed the *Times Educational Supplement* poll for UK teachers' favourite role model. (*Independent*)

**Terry Pratchett** sadly cancelled a public appearance: 'I [...] have been able to write for much longer than any of us ever thought possible, but now The Embuggerance is finally catching up with me, along with other age-related ailments.' (*Guardian*)

**Tove Jansson** of Moomintroll fame appears on a new two-Euro



coin from the Mint of Finland, marking her birth centenary in August.

**Kim Newman** announced: 'So I'll be letting my Horror Writers Association membership expire.' This in response to the HWA vote to allow self-published works as an active membership qualification, provided they earn \$2,000 within two years of publication. Various concerned commentators say SFWA [must never/urgently needs to] follow suit.

**Still More Awards.** Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery: Mildred Clingerman. • Mythopoeic (fantasy) novel categories. Adult: Helene Wecker, *The Golem and the Jinni*. Children: Holly Black, *Doll Bones*. • Prometheus (libertarian) novel award (tie): Cory Doctorow, *Homeland*; Ramez Naam, *Nexus*. • Sidewise (alt-history) novel award (tie): D.J. Taylor, *The Windsor Faction*; Bryce Zabel, *Surrounded by Enemies: What If Kennedy Survived Dallas?*.

**Diana Wynne Jones's** 80th birthday on 16 August was marked by an animated 'Google doodle' themed for *Howl's Moving Castle*.

### Thog's Masterclass.

*Palaeometeorology Dept.* 'It was a gorgeous day, with gossamer clouds strung out like dinosaur bones across the blue sky.' (Mark Edwards, *The Magpies*, 2013) • *Talking Dirty Dept.* 'The boy tilted back his head to scream at the sky and words erupted from the hole in his face like sewage from a burst pipe.' (Tom Ward, 'A Departure', 2013) • *Dept of Neat Tricks.* 'I had barely time to secrete myself before he turned. Luckily, the wall beside me was irregular with protuberances, and I was able to pack myself into one of them.' (Hugh B Cave, 'The Door of Doom', January 1932 *Strange*

*Tales*) • 'Masters hoisted his beef with two hands, took a bite, and looked at me through hunched shoulders as he chewed.' (Michael Harvey, *The Chicago Way*, 2007)

• 'She looked back at Marnes, saw him frowning at her beneath his moustache.' (Hugh Howey, *Wool*, 2011) • 'A hand took his, pressed it firmly, looked him straight in the eye.' (Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 2001)

### R.I.P.

**Margot Adler** (1946–2014), US radio journalist and author whose books include the nonfiction *Vampires Are Us* (2014), died on 28 July aged 68.

**Thomas Berger** (1924–2014), US author best known for the quasi-Western *Little Big Man* (1964), several of whose novels explored sf themes – from cryonics in *Vital Parts* (1960) to androids in *Adventures of the Artificial Woman* (2004) – died on 13 July. He was 89.

**John Blundall** (1937–2014), UK artist and puppeteer who created several characters for Gerry Anderson's Supermarionation shows – most famously Lady Penelope's butler/chauffeur Parker – died on 18 August aged 77.

**Neil Craig**, proprietor since the early 1980s of Glasgow's sf books and comics shop Futureshock, died unexpectedly on 29 June; he was 59.

**J.T. Edson** (1928–2014), UK author famed for Westerns, who also wrote the Tarzan-inspired Bunduki sf series opening with *Bunduki* (1975), died on 17 July aged 86.

**Curt Gentry** (1931–2014), US author whose disaster novel *The Last Days of the Late, Great State*

*of California* (1968) drops Los Angeles and most of California into the sea, died on 10 July aged 83.

**C.J. Henderson** (1951–2013), US author whose work included horror, urban fantasy – the Teddy London series opening with *The Things That Are Not There* (1992) – and comics, died on 4 July aged 62.

**Chapman Pincher** (1914–2014), UK journalist and author whose works include the sf *Not with a Bang* (1965) and some borderline-fantastic novels, died on 5 August; he was 100.

**Ana María Matute** (1925–2014), distinguished Spanish author whose novels often contained fantasy/supernatural elements, died on 25 June aged 88. Her many awards include the Cervantes Prize, the Spanish-speaking world's highest literary honour.

**Walter Dean Myers** (1937–2014), US author whose popular YA stories (two were Newbery Honor Books) include the sf *Brainstorm* (1977), died on 1 July aged 76.

**Lawrence P. Santoro**, US horror author and podcast host whose story collection is *Drink for the Thirst to Come* (2011), died on 25 July aged 71.

**Jan Shephard** (1935–2014), UK designer and art editor for various comics including *Valiant*, *2000 AD* (where she created the Judge Dredd title logo) from its 1977 launch and *Starlord*, died on 27 June.

**Jory Sherman** (1932–2014), US author of many Westerns and the seven-book 'Chill' psychic-investigator series beginning with *Satan's Seed* (1978), died on 28 June; he was 81.



## FUTURE INTERRUPTED

### JONATHAN McCALMONT

#### DOCTOR JOHNSON'S AWESOME MIX TAPE

As the late American writer David Foster Wallace once pointed out, we are existentially alone on the planet. Trapped inside two and a bit pounds of skull, I cannot feel what you are feeling and you cannot know what I am thinking. Books, at their best, are a bridge constructed across the abyss of human loneliness for it is only by immersing ourselves in the words and thoughts of others that we can escape the cramped confines of our own bedraggled self. If we take Foster Wallace at his word and assume that art should aim to break down the barriers between stranded subjectivities then we need to think about how you are going to relate to me and I to you.

In a recent article published in *The New Yorker* magazine, Rebecca Meads describes how calling a piece of work 'relatable' has emerged as the highest piece of critical praise that this particular cultural moment can bestow. At first glance, calling something relatable seems to be little more than an ugly way of calling it accessible but relatability is actually a much narrower concept. To call a work accessible is to say that neither its style nor its content constitute much of a barrier when



it comes to getting to grips with what a work is really trying to say. Relatability, on the other hand, tends to be a quality that accrues to characters whose experiences are so similar to those of the audience that literally everyone can find themselves in what a work is trying to describe. Meads refers to relatability as a scourge on Western culture, an aesthetic designed to ensure that audiences need neither stretch their empathic muscles nor make an imaginative leap. For Meads, making a work relatable means sticking it in a blender, pulping the difficulty and serving it up for an audience so intellectually toothless that they prefer to ingest their culture through a straw. As someone who enjoys the challenge of unflinchingly difficult books and films, my first instinct is to agree with Meads but science fiction is something of a special case: a genre prone to setting its stories on alien planets filled with alien characters does need to worry about how it can grant its readers access to an author's headspace. This is a column about two works of science fiction that, despite being radically different use similar storytelling techniques to make the inhuman seem relatable.

Already being touted as the surprise box-office sensation of the summer by people who are evidently unaware of advertising, James Gunn's *Guardians of the Galaxy* is the first Marvel Studios film to focus exclusively on events with no connection to Earth. Genre fans might not perceive this as much of a barrier to entry but it is worth remembering that, up until quite recently, works like Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy and Matthew Vaughn's *X-Men: First Class* worked incredibly hard to implant their superheroes in gritty realistic worlds lest their audience find the thought of spandex-clad vigilantes with magical powers just a little bit too silly. This is a very real concern for studio executives as Martin Campbell's *Green Lantern* was ripped to shreds for attempting to combine standard superheroics with po-faced space opera.

*Guardians of the Galaxy* opens with one of the most nakedly manipulative sequences in recent cinematic history as a small child is forced to bid a reluctant farewell to his dying mother. Reminiscent of those TV adverts encouraging us to give money to sick kiddies and adorable puppies, the scene is intended to make us feel pity before using that pity to drag us off to an alien landscape filled with strange planets and exotic aliens whose names describe what it is they do for a living: The Collector, The Broker, Ronan The Accuser, Graham The Mid-Level Manager In A Regional Office Supplies Company. You know...the type of stupid clunky shit that genre fiction stopped doing a generation ago.

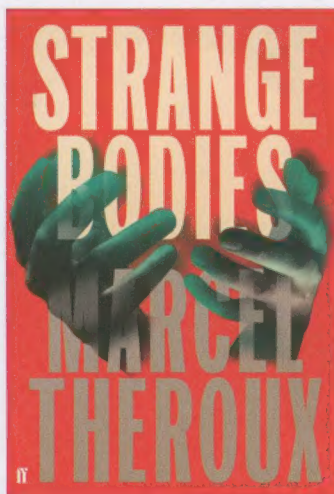
Having used a dead parent to manipulate the audience into caring about its blandly human point-of-view character, the film still faces a tough climb up the north face of Mount Exposition. Clearly concerned that his audience might black out at the seven-





teenth line of dialogue beginning “As you know...” Gunn uses a combination of manipulative sentimentality, impossibly broad humour and old-fashioned values like family and friendship to keep his story relatable. The film’s main protagonist even carries around an old Walkman containing a mix tape of his mother’s favourite songs and while the rights to those 1970s disco tunes must have cost Marvel an arm and a leg, the trans-generational nostalgia they kick up does serve to ease the audience into the kind of dense, pompous and irksome setting that might otherwise have sent them running from the cinema.

A million miles and a billion dollars away from the heavy-handed manipulations of *Guardians* is one of the finest science fiction novels of 2013. Already familiar to genre audiences thanks to his Clarke Award-nominated *Far North*, Marcel Theroux’s fifth novel *Strange Bodies* begins with a man unexpectedly turning up at an ex-girlfriend’s home. What makes this arrival unexpected is the fact that the man is supposed to have died in a road traffic accident and while all of his mannerisms and memories point to the fact that he is the person he claims to be, he looks entirely different. How can a



man be both alive and dead as well as both himself and someone else? Theroux answers this question by using science fictional conceits to examine the nature of the self as well as our ideas about life, death and personal identity.

Reading *Strange Bodies* means learning to navigate a maze of framing devices; one chapter is presented as a diary entry, the next takes the form of a psychiatrist’s notes, then we move on to a letter before slinking back to a diary entry from what might be an entirely different timeframe. Each of these devices provides a very different view of the book’s protagonist and encourages us to wonder whether these fractious snapshots might not actually be of different people. Theroux eventually explains what is going on by invoking the kind of gonzo science and quasi-mystical politics that you’d expect from a secret history of the Soviet Union but as challenging as the book’s understanding of the self may be, Theroux has already laid the groundwork by using his framing devices to coax us into asking questions to which he has all the answers. By asking his readers to meet him half way, Theroux ensures that the journey seems much shorter and the small imaginative leap he leaves us with

is made just that little bit easier by the introduction of a major literary figure.

Our guide to the world of Theroux’s novel is the 18th Century poet, essayist, critic and lexicographer Doctor Samuel Johnson. His appearance in 21st Century London is designed to both provoke questions about the nature of the self (‘is it really Doctor Johnson?’) and get us used to looking at the world through science fictional goggles. Theroux’s Johnson expresses horror at the type of things that middle-class Londoners keep in their kitchens and wonder at the idea of restaurants that serve nothing but cheese and tomato on flat bread. Warm and incredibly funny, these fish-out-of-water moments detach us from the present and prepare us for thinking about the novel’s hypothetical future. A time from which the contemporary reader and protagonist are just as disconnected as Johnson is from ours.

Despite their differences, *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Strange Bodies* share that quintessentially science fictional need to guide their audiences away from their mundane existence and towards worlds that are strikingly different from their own. However, while Theroux’s Pizza-loving Johnson may well be nothing more than a sophisticated version of Gunn’s disco-loving protagonist, it is worth paying attention to the reasons why these writers want to usher across the bridge of human loneliness in the first place: Theroux uses Johnson as a means of encouraging us to ask questions about life, death and who we are as people while Gunn wants us to be aware of some stuff that’ll help us to make sense of the next *Avengers* movie. Just because science fiction shares a set of common techniques, it doesn’t mean that all science fiction is equally worthy of your time.



## TIME PIECES

### NINA ALLAN



## SOME ROSES AND THEIR PHANTOMS

We moved house this summer. Knowing that our trips to London will be less frequent in future, one of the things I did in the weeks leading up to the move was to pay a visit to the Surrealists at Tate Modern. There are paintings there I've known and loved since my early teens, and the artists who created them have been a source of inspiration ever since. One of the works that means most to me is the 1943 painting 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik', by Dorothea Tanning. It is an extraordinary, resoundingly fantastical work, both menacing and somehow uplifting, that depicts a confrontation between a young girl and a giant sunflower in a hotel corridor. The girl's clothes are torn, seeming to suggest that an act of violence has recently occurred, and the sunflower itself seems alive, sentient, its stems and petals simultaneously reaching towards the girl and blocking her path. The Tate also owns Tanning's later work, 'Some Roses and their Phantoms', a surreal still life in which once again flowers seem to have acquired a malign animation.

While looking at these paintings, I found myself reflecting

on how little known they are in comparison with the works of Tanning's more famous partner, the German painter and pioneer of the Dada movement Max Ernst. There is no evidence that Ernst is the 'better' painter – indeed from a personal standpoint I would argue that Tanning shows the greater technical refinement. Tanning supported herself with her art from a young age, and her career trajectory – she outlived Ernst by more than three decades – was longer. Yet of the two, Ernst is still the artist more people have heard of.

I've been aware of such inequalities for years. During my early period of fascination with the Surrealists, information on Ernst was presented to me by the yard; information on Tanning I had to search for. Following my trip to London I decided to conduct a small experiment. Posing as a casual browser, I looked up general biographical information on both artists online, I was shocked to discover that although Ernst's lengthy Wikipedia entry covers his association with Tanning in just a few lines and does not even identify Tanning as an artist

in her own right, more than half of the biography section in Tanning's entry is devoted to her relationship with Ernst. Even the photograph used to illustrate the article shows her beside Ernst, with Ernst positioned slightly towards the foreground.

A year after Tanning painted 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik', the science fiction writer C.L. Moore published her novella *No Woman Born*. In it, she tells the story of Deirdre, a beautiful dancer who has perished in a theatre fire and is then brought back to life as what we would probably describe today as a cyborg. Her brain – fortunately undamaged – is housed within an elaborate mechanical construct, a new metal body that Deirdre has learned to control and animate with the power of her mind. For Harris, who knew her before the fire, the new Deirdre is something unearthly, something more than human. But in spite of the physical reconstruction she has been subjected to, Deirdre still retains the cast of mind and grace of being that made her remarkable. When Moore describes the new Deirdre's finely moulded head as resembling a sculpture by Brancusi, I cannot help thinking again of Dorothea Tanning, who would have known Brancusi's work well, and whose representation of animate form tended more and more towards similar abstractions as her vision progressed.

There is nothing of the surreal in what follows, though. Moore's story is a tightly argued piece of science fiction that interrogates the nature of artificial intelligence, the rights of engineered life forms, and what actually constitutes a human being. Maltzer, the scientist who has designed Deirdre's new body and helped to reintegrate her mind with her altered form, insists that she has





C.L. Moore

lost everything that made her not only a proper human being but more specifically a *female* human being. He tries to persuade Harris that Deidre must be prevented from taking up her art again, because if she does, her formerly adoring audiences are likely to brand her a freak and turn on her. "She has enough already," Maltzer says. "She can live normally as other people live, without going back on the screen... She's too fragile to stand that."

Maltzer's attitudes may be horrifying, but they are not significantly different from those of the male biographers, art directors and book publishers who have either consciously or unconsciously sought to denigrate or annul the work or even the existence of so many female artists and writers across the centuries. What Maltzer wants, in the end, is to maintain control over Deidre. In cloaking his desire to suppress her creativity behind a mask of concern for her mental and physical wellbeing – in 'not wanting her to be hurt' – he is reminiscent of the doctor-husband John in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's groundbreaking weird tale of

1892 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. In seeking to censor not only Jane's physical independence but her very thought processes, John is revealed as yet another respected professional who finds it difficult to accommodate the fact that his wife's talents may be equal or superior to his own.

As science fiction, Moore's story is remarkably prescient, and in Moore's lush, imaginatively unfettered approach to speculative materials we see the beginnings of the genre-defying science fantasies of her modern-day counterparts. But *No Woman Born* could equally be interpreted as a depiction of a woman's struggle to be herself, without censure or curtailment by men. Such censure and curtailment are especially to be condemned when they originate with a loved one or partner. Moore shows us one woman's struggle to free herself from the bonds of such a partnership and enter new territory, to be what she knows she is, rather than what her man desires and demands that she should be. Deidre's loneliness in her struggle is palpable, yet she knows she must continue, regardless of whether others will summon the bravery to follow her.

When C.L. Moore's husband and collaborator Henry Kuttner died in 1958, Moore stopped writing science fiction, concentrating on TV scriptwriting instead. When she married again in 1963, her second husband, Thomas Reggie, discouraged her from writing altogether. Compared with the many well known male contributors to *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Science Fiction* whose careers were spawned at the same time, and in spite of the fact that she was recognised by her peers as one of the most original voices among them, there is remarkably little biographical information

on Catherine Moore. We are told that Thomas Reggie 'forbade' her from writing, that he vetoed her attendance at the ceremony that would have made her a SF Grandmaster on the grounds that Moore – whose health was failing – would find the celebrations in her honour 'too confusing'. I have not thus far been able to discover any readily available documentation that puts Moore's side of the story, or gives a fuller account of how and why these acts of oppression were perpetrated.

I was interviewed by telephone last month for the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* to coincide with the Spanish publication of *The Silver Wind*. A part of the discussion was given over to what my interviewer, the journalist and writer Angel Luis Sucasas referred to as the 'international new wave' of women in science fiction and fantasy, writers like Lauren Beukes, Karin Tidbeck, Sofia Rhei, Nnedi Okorafor, Benjanun Sriduangkaew, Aliette de Bodard – the list goes on. On the one hand, talking about these writers and their achievements felt immensely gratifying, a reminder of how much ground has been fought for and won by women in SFF in recent years. As I said to Angel at the time, the idea that women do not write SF – that women do not *write*, period – was always a pernicious myth, and women artists are simply not prepared to put up with such blatant sexism any longer. Reflecting on our conversation later though, I felt bound to ask myself whether we truly are the first generation of women SFF writers *not* to be at least partially defined by our male partners, editors, commentators or industry professionals? I really think we might be, a fact I find both cheering and utterly dismaying. We are getting there, yes. But why the hell has it taken so long?

# Marielena

## BY NINA ALLAN

**M**arielena. My love, my muse, my demon. Since I was forced to leave my country, I am dispossessed of her. Ma-ri-elena. I say her name to myself in the dark when I can't sleep, rolling the syllables around on my tongue like so many dark pearls. Because she is lost to me I see her in everyone.

ILLUSTRATED BY TARA BUSH





In the financier with her Jimmy Choos and her green Cross briefcase. The foul-mouthed publican, her forearms like an Olympic rower's, her hair so red it dims the traffic lights – stop, stop, stop. The Pakistani student – Dolce & Gabbana spectacles, black hijab. The child with her dirt-smeared cheek and scabby knees. Marielena taunts me in her manifold guises and then slips away, hiding herself in the shadows. I strain to catch her voice, but all I hear is the noise of traffic and the shouts of youths, kicking a crumpled beer can down the street. Marielena's absence is my greatest punishment. She sees my desertion as a betrayal, but I had no choice.

You imagine you understand how it begins. You – with your passport from birth and your front door key, your insurance against life, death and hijacking – think of palace coups and mobs with guns, young men in dirty bandanas and shouldering Kalashnikovs. How about a voting booth, a press conference, a gaggle of bland-speaking politicians wearing Western clothes? That's how it's done these days, believe me. Why shoot when you can legislate? The guns come out right at the end, for those who don't get the message or who won't get lost.

I chose to get lost, to come here. Marielena insisted I should stand my ground. *It's your country*, she said. *These people, they're just fly-by-nights*. She meant our new government. *We will outlive them all*. Anyway, she said. *You'll shrivel up and die in a place like that. What are you going to write about? And you know I hate the cold*.

"I can't outlive anyone if I don't have a head," I reasoned. Marielena fell silent. She didn't say the word coward out loud, but I knew she was thinking it.

I imagine these decisions must be simpler when you're a demon. Human death is like a bruise – it soon fades.

"You will come, though," I said to her. "We'll stay together?"

She kept her silence at first, and I thought she was sulking. Then she turned on me with fire in her eyes and asked me how I expected her to live in a country that had sold its soul. Not to the devil, oh no, but to the annual APR and

the FTSE, whatever that was, to McDonald's and Madonna and the iPhone.

*The devil, now*, she said. *That might have been interesting*.

She told me she'd suffocate, then refused to discuss the matter any further. I thought she'd come round in the end. She had to. We were a team.

They kept us waiting in a secure enclosure at the airport. (If you thought secure enclosures were only for cattle, you would be wrong.) On the other side of the barrier, a woman who had failed the preliminary entrance stipulation was being escorted by two armed border guards towards a waiting plane. The woman was screaming and crying and rending her clothes. The border guards kept on going, just doing their job. I saw Marielena's fury in that woman's eyes, as I knew she meant me to. Her anger and her terror and her wordless farewell.

Muse and monster, Marielena, how is her loss even bearable for me to contemplate, much less suffer?

What do I think of when I think of my country? The special lamb dish my mother used to make, with apricots. Apricots, and shaded courtyards, and the stony road that leads you from the village right into the city. The city, with its markets and its protocols, the bookstore and Turkish cafe, the tiny forbidden record exchange, where at one time you could put on headphones and listen to albums by the Bee Gees and Nirvana, Mahalia Jackson and Amália Rodrigues, Salif Keita and Bob Dylan and Suzanne Vega.

*Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river*. I could have fallen for you, dear Suzanne, if not for Marielena. She would have torn me apart, piece by bloody piece, had she ever suspected.

The smell of scorched earth and ripening figs, the tawny back of the midday sun, beating with a golden hammer on the terracotta roof tiles.

Tabby cats, swift ectomorphs, their mangy hides speckled with dust motes, patrolling the backyards of restaurants, jousting for scraps.

Foreign newspapers and tobacco root, chess games at dusk. Incense, incensed, insensible.

Myself, running home from school, harangu-



ing my mother with my first ecstatic, eager, arrogant words of poetry.

I wake to rain.

Is this a new kind of temple that we come to, this damp concrete edifice where the Border Agency keeps its offices, its grey walls slick with drizzle, its acolytes in their nylon uniforms, deciding our fates behind a toughened glass screen with a tick in a box?

What do they make of our dramas, these men and women? You hear stories – stories of a Sudanese pastor, setting himself on fire outside the town hall in Leicester, of a computing graduate from Eritrea, revealing her genital mutilations to Customs and Excise at the port of Dover. Stories of pepper spray and mass hysteria, of dirty hypodermics and hatchets and electric steak knives. It is because of stories like these that the reinforced glass has been installed, the panic buttons and the sprinkler system, as effective against self-immolation as it is against illicit smoking in the agency toilets.

I could tell you I have no understanding of what drives my fellow supplicants to such acts of violence, but the truth is I do. The choking tide of rage and despair, the brain-freezing boredom, the night sweats and blurred vision and shortness of breath, all synonyms for the terror that overthrows you as you are dragged feet first out of your life and into this limbo. You are no one here until you can back up your personal tragedy with the appropriate paperwork.

The temple servants in their ugly uniforms know nothing. They are simply minions. Why waste energy committing suicide when there will always be more?

"I'm sorry, Mr Wahid, but we're still waiting for a date for your hearing."

"Do you have any idea when that will be?"

A resolute shake of the head. "I'm sorry, but I really can't say. Your forms are still in the system, I'm afraid."

"Does this mean I can't look for work yet?"

"That's all set out in your information booklet. Paid employment of any kind is strictly forbidden unless or until your request for asylum has been granted."

I am not allowed to work, or to sign on for income support for another three months, maybe six if my application is left pending. I am permitted to claim my £20 weekly allowance from the Red Cross. I am allowed to pick up my free food vouchers, officially stamped, at the start of each week. It is not exactly the financial advancement we are said to be chasing.

In my country I was a qualified teacher on a generous salary. I taught basic literacy to village children, the study of literature to any adults who showed interest and who could spare the time. Some of the places I went to teach were accessible only on foot. Marielena, walking beside me, told scurrilous stories or composed sestinas, breaking my heart with her talent, which she took so lightly.

The children welcomed me as a preacher, or as a freak.

When I say *asylum seeker*, what do you see? A teacher and poet, laughing and sore-footed, or a pitiful wretch in an unwashed shirt, standing in line for handouts at your DSS?

The way they look at me, the people of your country. I do not know which is worse: the aggressive suspicion of the youths who hang around the supermarket car park, or the primvoiced, closed-hearted annunciations of the servants of the Border Agency. There is pity in their eyes, or at least there is sometimes, but it is a pity that soon converts itself into indifference. The curt syllables of their textbook English slide into my bloodstream like injected toxins, coating the arteries that feed my brain with their fatty deposits. I can feel my soul asphyxiating. I hear their language in my own mouth and it is like eating thorns. The blunt presumptuousness of this foreign tongue, this barbed intrusion, cutting the sensitive flesh of my throat like the trefails of thistles.

The airport enclosure where they held us was fenced in with razor wire. I had not expected, so soon, to experience something that reminded me so sharply of what I hoped to escape.

Your English feels like a language I will never master. I cannot even order a cup of coffee at a restaurant stand without revealing myself for what I am: a *foreigner*. And you thought it was the *language of poetry*? says Marielena, and laughs.

I pass my weekly report card across the counter. The youth stamps it, and hands it back, and then I leave.

By the time I get outside, it is raining again. People are sheltering in shop doorways. A woman in a man's overcoat pushes a supermarket trolley in a wavering line along the pavement. She shuffles rather than walks, her shoulders hunched over, almost as if she is expecting an assailant to launch himself upon her from behind. The overcoat is horrible, filthy with the stains of some dried-on contaminant that I think might be spaghetti sauce. At first the sight of the shopping cart confuses me. Then I realise the woman must be a homeless person, what in colloquial English I have heard referred to as a *bag lady*. She is using the stolen trolley to transport her possessions. At home, the sight of a beggar would arouse in me nothing more than the accustomed feelings of guilt and regret, but my visit to the Border Agency has scourged my soul of charity. I am filled with resentment for this unknown woman, who has so carelessly squandered her birthright and her privilege. Whatever misfortune has befallen her, she still has her country. However sordid she becomes, no one can make her give up her name, or force her to leave.

How could anyone born into such riches dispose of them so thoughtlessly?

Annoyance hastens my step. I am eager to pass her by, to forget she exists. As I draw level with her, the woman turns her head briefly in my direction. Her eyes are huge and tired, and there is a scab on her lower lip. We gaze at one another with surprise, and for a moment I am almost convinced she is someone I know.

For a moment, she is not a stranger, she is Marielena.

*What has happened to me is not so very different from what has happened to you.*

I open my mouth to say her name, but she has turned her back on me. The wheels of her shopping cart tangle briefly with a piece of litter, and then she is gone.

My allocated lodgings are on Davenport Street, which is a busy bus route, one of the three or four main thoroughfares that traverse the city. The houses on Davenport Street are tall and

old, their windows and brickwork streaked with the residue of traffic fumes, their roofs steeply pitched, like praying hands, covered in moss. My room at number 13 Davenport Street is ten feet by twelve feet, a little larger than the average English prison cell. The room contains a single bed, a wardrobe, and a dressing table. The bed is against the far wall, with its head beneath the window. The wardrobe, which is of the cheap, mass-produced variety that can be purchased in its constituent pieces and assembled *in situ*, stands at the foot of the bed. There is just enough space between it and the wardrobe to open the doors. The dressing table is kidney-shaped, with a discoloured oval mirror, a monstrosity whose past is likely as long and as obscure as the history of the house itself. When I first came to live in this room I hated the dressing table with an insidious, soul-destroying mania that seemed to suck on my sanity as a parasitical, venomous worm might eat away at my brain. It was as if this outmoded and ugly piece of furniture had been placed there deliberately, to mock me, an emblem of the hopelessness of my situation.

In time our relationship changed. I began to see myself and the dressing table as comrades, as fellow survivors. I look after it now as a treasured possession, my own sacred monster. I have washed the faded damask curtains that hide its bow legs, I keep the glass top dusted, I polish the mirror. At times I have even tried to picture Marielena seated before it, combing her hair like Sheherazade, studying her features in the clouded glass.

She glares at me from the corner of one eye.

*You've got to be joking, comrade.*

The best thing about my room at 13 Davenport Street is that no one is likely to burst into it and try to kill me. I have yet to find the words to describe the full extent of my journey to this place and time. Perhaps Marielena is right – the sudden absence of imminent danger makes me feel like a fraud.

I choose to write instead about this room. I write in the manner of Robbe-Grillet, of Perec and Touissant, the titans and tyrants of the *nouveau roman* who were so fashionable among my peer group at the university. I describe the objects on the dressing table (a box of matches,



a packet of biscuits, the key to this room), the blanket on the bed (the money I could not afford to spend but squandered anyway, simply because the blanket's colours reminded me so painfully of home), the damp spot on the wall (if you gaze at it long enough and hard enough you begin to believe in its existence as a pocket universe). I write in English, trying it on for size like some uncomfortable new garment, a piece of clothing I would not have chosen for myself but reach for now in the absence of an alternative. I imagine the clothes they give you in prison might feel like this.

My vocal command of English is still hesitant, but it is improving. Even if Marielena returns to me eventually, the person she embraces will be a different man.

I write my journal for as long as I can bear to and then I go out. I have found it best not to stay in the room for too long, even if – as so often – the weather is unsuitable for walking. It is too easy to imagine losing the courage and the motivation to leave it at all.

What is a city, when the bland pursuits of getting and spending are all but closed off to you? Shops – even the most commonplace of high street clothing stores, the most utilitarian of kitchen suppliers, electrical repair stores – begin to take on the aspect of mythical emporia, their merchandise the impossible relics of the deep past or the far future. In the dying light of early evening, the denizens of this alien universe guffaw and cavort. As I pass through the concrete canyon of the shopping precinct, I see a group of young people whooping and groaning, excitable primates that they are, in front of the supersize flat-screen TV in one of the windows. There is a football match in progress, but their noise seems to be about itself – the act of making it – more than any excitement or rancour about the game. I hurry past with my head down. I know their attentions could be transferred in an instant from the football to me.

When they look at me, what do they see? Not the reality, but a rumour, a cheapened, pirated image from that same TV screen: vagrant, rag-head, scrounger, cheat, immigrant, shift-eyed Ay-rab *suicide bomber*. Most of them don't

know what these things are, not properly. The television has told them that they are harmful, and that is enough. They are with their friends, which makes life easier, even when it's hard. None of them have yet been forced into a position where thinking for themselves could mean the difference between life and death.

Their motiveless aggression is almost a comfort. For these young people I am simply a brown space, a foreign-made receptacle for their various frustrations. They don't care about me, only what they believe I might represent, and I feel glad. Being attacked for who you actually are is a hundred times worse.

On some days, I might almost feel sorry for them.

I walk as far as the canal. It is now full dusk. The concrete stanchions of the road bridge soar upwards into the darkness like the forelegs of some monumental beast. The street lamps along the canal's edge turn the carrier-bag-infested surface of the viscous water to an orange soup. Beyond the lights, the towpath, swallowed in blackness, extends indefinitely.

It is a dangerous place, the towpath, it is beyond the pale. If I were to be killed there, or badly beaten, no one, least of all the police, would express surprise.

*Asking for it, aren't they?*

*Stupid foreigners.*

Yet still I stand at the kerb, daring myself to walk between the stanchions and on to the towpath, for no other reason than to prove to myself that it is my right to walk where I choose. What have I come to this country for, if not for this?

I scrape my shoe against the dirt, a glinting mixture of topsoil and cinders and broken glass. I've heard it said that the frisson of active transgression soon becomes addictive.

"I wouldn't go down there, if I were you."

I jump inside my skin. I believed myself alone. It is disconcerting and a little frightening to discover someone has been sharing this space with me all along. The voice is a woman's. I stare at the figure before me. There is something familiar about her, but it takes me a moment to realise that it is the woman with the shopping cart I saw outside the Border Agency. She is wearing the

same too-big overcoat, and a dark woollen cap pulled down low over her forehead.

Seeing her here is surprising, almost ominous. I don't know why that should be, but it is so.

*You thought she couldn't speak, didn't you? Go on, admit it.*

She loves to goad me, Marielena. She claims my best work is mostly the result of her goading. She is not here, of course she's not – her voice is my own wishful thinking – and yet there is truth in what she says, that it was easier for me to believe the woman with the trolley must be stupid as well as homeless, to assume she has mislaid her voice along with her sanity.

I am no better than the youths on the high street, yelling obscenities at the television screen and lobbing dog shit at passing pensioners. How easily we convince ourselves that those who have fallen into the mud have nothing to say.

"I didn't see you," I say to her. I realise my words are true in a multitude of ways. The act of speaking to this stranger unnerves me. It comes to me that other than my ritualised encounters with the Border Agency and my fumbling conversations with shopkeepers and library staff, these are the first words of English I have exchanged with another person since I first arrived here. I savour the words again inside my head, hoping the woman can understand my accent. That she will not laugh, or turn on me like the street kids.

"The canal path is a low place," the woman says. Her voice is soft and rasping as a tarnished key in a rusty lock, and I have some trouble in comprehending her. I am confused by her use of the word low. Does she mean that the path is on low-lying ground, that it is dangerous because it passes too close to the river? When I look up the word later, in my battered Collins paperback English dictionary, I discover that low can also signify degraded, poor, evil, or mean.

I take a single step towards her. She is standing close to one of the streetlamps leading to the road bridge, and in the light it throws I am able to observe her face clearly for the first time. She is younger than I imagined, and the firm set of her mouth reminds me for just a second of my mother, the way she always looked when she was trying to tell me something important.

"Are you from here?" I ask, then immediately

feel foolish. What is my question supposed to mean, exactly? From this city, this country, this planet, this dirty strip of pathway alongside the canal? When the woman begins to laugh I am not surprised.

"That's a tricky question," she says. "I was born here in the city though, if that's what you mean. We lived on Coulter Street."

Once again I find it difficult to grasp her meaning, a failing I put down to my poor command of English. I know Coulter Street, though, because it is close to the library. The houses there are large and well kept. There is something unsettling, not quite real, in the idea that this unfortunate once lived in such a house, that she once had her home there.

It would be easy to dismiss her words as fantasies, yet she seems perfectly lucid.

"My name is Noah, by the way," I say to her.

"Mary."

She comes towards me then, dragging her stuffed-full shopping cart behind her. As she approaches I begin to smell the sharp, raw stench of the streets, the odour of bad drains and unwashed clothes, the scent I would sometimes catch on Marielena when she returned to me after one of her periodic absences, the sour reek I fear now emanates from me, also.

Mary. It is an odd coincidence. Her eyes are amber in the lamplight, shading to gold.

"You shouldn't be out here at night," she says. "It's dangerous, even when you think it's not." We are both silent for a moment, and then she says something strange. "I have a present for you. Would you like to have it now?"

She turns away from me to reach into her shopping cart. I feel a surge of panic, wondering what I will do if she offers me a filthy rag, a piece of half-eaten food, a plastic bag full of dog faeces. What she gives me instead is a book. She presses it into my hands, like a missionary from the old times, fervently offering a contraband bible to the unenlightened.

"It's old, but it's very good," she says. She tugs the woollen cap a little further down her forehead. "You should read it."

I glance down at the book in my hands. Part of the cover is missing, but there is enough of it left for me to see that I am holding a copy of *URL*



*Not Found*, by the French-Egyptian writer Zaira Massi. I have never read it – our new government banned it, along with all the rest of Massi's novels – but of course I have heard of it, it is one of those books everyone has heard of, whether they enjoy reading or not. It was published quite recently, three years ago at the most. I wonder what Mary means by calling it old?

That the copy itself is well worn, perhaps? It is true that it is not in good condition.

"That woman was a hero," Mary whispers. "She comes to me in dreams. She saved my life."

I have no idea what Mary is talking about, or why she is speaking about Zaira Massi as if she were dead. Massi is still alive, so far as I know, though I am sure there are people – people in our new government, for example – who would wish otherwise.

"I would love to borrow this," I say to Mary. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

She shakes her head. "Keep it," she says. "I don't need it." She hugs her sides and shuffles her feet. There is an aggressive tone to her voice that wasn't there before, and I wonder if this is my fault, if I've done something to offend her. Could it be she wants money? If so I have none to give her.

"I should be going," I say, lamely. The idea that I have somewhere to go, even if it is only the sorry little room on Davenport Street, makes me feel uncomfortable. I wonder where Mary will sleep tonight, and for the first time since the airport I feel like an imposter. As if in answer to my thoughts, a burst of laughter and a string of curse words float down towards the canal path from the darkened shopping precinct. The TV kids, most likely. What is it about laughter in the dark that makes it so frightening?

"They don't know what they have," Mary says. Her voice is softer now, calmer. She speaks in a tone of wonderment, as if she has stumbled by chance upon a truth she had not previously realised. "Those poor children."

I want to ask her what she means, but before I can frame my question she leans forward on the handle bar of her shopping cart and begins pushing it back uphill towards the city centre. For a while I can still hear the grumbling sound of the trolley's wheels against the fractured con-

crete, but after a minute or so even that is gone.

Zaira Massi's novel is about a woman who falls prey to identity theft. Little by little she is rendered into nothingness. It is a terrifying story.

"We're very sorry, Mr Wahid, but until the relevant documentation comes through we really can't..."

"You've been telling me this for six months already. I come here every week like I'm supposed to but nothing changes."

I think about banging my fist on the counter, then realise the very fact that I am still thinking about doing it means I won't, that the moment for action has already passed. I wonder how it might have felt, for once, just to act without thinking, and in the wondering I find I can almost feel the impact of my fist against the slightly greasy laminated surface of the countertop, the shock to the wrist, the dull glow of pain afterwards. The young woman behind the counter stares at me guardedly. Her expression is the expression of an animal trainer, trying to work out if the tiger she has raised from a cub is about to turn rogue. She shifts her chrome-legged chair backwards, just an inch or two, on the dimpled rubber floor tiles. The woman is new here, or at least I have not encountered her before. She has hair the colour of beechwood, clipped short at the sides and thickly curled on top, like an autumn chrysanthemum. There is a perfectly round, almost-black mole about a centimetre to the right of her right nostril. It punctuates her skin like a strict full stop, an indication of negative certitude. No. Nothing. Never.

"I do understand, Mr Wahid. This is a difficult time for all of our clients. I would advise you to be patient. Is everything all right at your lodgings?"

She tries on a smile, but I can see she is still wondering if I might be dangerous. One of the quiet ones, she is thinking, who turn out to be maniacs after all, the ones you see on the news who cut off the heads of their neighbours with Samurai swords.

I search her features for traces of Marielena, but there are none, just the merest disturbance of her lipstick at the corner of her mouth, a

brick-red smear. Like curry paste, I can feel the heat in it. I turn my back on her and walk away, without smiling, without apologising, without thanking her. It is my one small act of revenge and it makes me feel lower than a dog.

From the back of the DSS offices a narrow, concreted alleyway cuts through to the loading bays at the lower end of the shopping precinct. I do not normally walk this way. Apart from in the early mornings the area is usually deserted, a Mecca for muggers. It is too easy to imagine being tumbled against the hard ground and left for dead. Today I don't care, though. The loss of hope has made me fearless. I stride through the litter, my head filled with images of crashing walls and billowing smoke, terrified people trampling each other in their need to escape.

*Now you're talking*, says Marielena. I emerge on to Lonsdale Place, and this is where I see Mary. I recognise her at once this time, even though she has her back to me – the hunched-over posture, the grey woollen cap – but I am dismayed to see that she has fallen in with bad company. Four or five young people surround her – they may even be the same young people from the other night, grouped around the shop window yelling at the football game. How can I tell? They stand in a loose half-circle, not touching her, not yet, but in such a way as to cut off her escape. From time to time one or other of them takes a single step forward, and in this way they inch gradually closer to their victim.

I imagine their smells mingling, the mixed sap of their malice and boredom, the two curdling to excitement as each silently challenges the other to make the first move. I am not close enough to hear what they are saying, but their hostility is unmistakable, heady as incense.

As I draw nearer, one of them, a girl, snaps out a hand and seizes the handle of Mary's shopping trolley. She bumps the cart smartly towards her across the flagstones. When Mary tries to drag it back, the girl begins yelling.

"Get your sodding hands off me, you filthy cow."

Mary begins to moan, a high, wailing sound. She's faking it, I can tell, trying to scare them off, trying to convince them she's too crazy to

be a safe target. The girl lets go of the shopping trolley, and for a moment it seems that Mary's deception has worked, that the youths will disperse. But then one of the others – a lad with a shaven head and a tattoo of a large green eye on his right forearm – steps forward and wrests the trolley back again. He stoops, shoving his face at Mary, who falls silent immediately. She tries to back away, and now I am close enough to see the fear in her eyes, not the abject fright of the hopeless, the helpless, but the knowing terror of someone who has run for her life before and almost lost it.

With one single, casual wrist movement the youth overturns Mary's shopping cart. There is a hideous clattering sound. Clumped batches of things strew themselves noisily across the pavement. The girl who called Mary a cow begins to laugh.

"Crazy bitch," snarls the youth with the tattoo. He is still pressing his face forward into Mary's, and it is as if he is trying to identify her by her scent, smelling her out like one of the sniffer dogs the police use for searching airports and abandoned buildings. "Get the fuck away from her or I'll belt you one." Mary shrinks away from him, and it is at that moment that something breaks free in me, *tears* itself free, I run down the street towards the group, towards *him*. I can hear myself screaming, cursing like a demon, words in my own language and in yours, words I did not know I knew how to say until this moment.

As I rage and accuse, I feel the freedom of the asylum unfurling its crimson within me like a great red flower. For what freedom does a madman have but the freedom to do, say, be anything he chooses?

"You bastards, you cunts. So cowardly you have to take out your foulness on a homeless person? You idiots know nothing. Have you ever been hungry? Have you ever been truly afraid, even for a second? I'll teach you to be afraid, you morons. I'll teach you, and then I'll end you. I'll bash your stupid heads in, how does that sound? Not so tough now, are you? You worthless lumps of shit, I'll kill you all."

*Shit, shit, shit*, I keen. I feel I am in love with the word, mutable as the tide, eloquent as the dawn, as an ode by Keats or Coleridge or Cavafy.



Would this be happening if my appointment with the Border Agency had brought me better news? I don't know and I don't care. All I know is that my anger is unstoppable. It flies at them, these cut-price ruffians, with the uncanny, elegant swiftness of an Afghan hound.

From the corner of my eye I glimpse Marielena. She rolls on her back in the gutter, shaking with laughter. Her heavy-lidded eyes are bright with desire.

I can sense the tattooed youth is ready to punch me. He is so close to doing it I can almost taste the blood, feel the sickening crunch of my teeth as they give way. Then I see that he is going to back down, after all. There is something in my demented form he does not like. One of his cohorts, a shorter, broader youth with hair so orange it is like rust on the bulging roof of an old tin shack, spits on the ground.

"You ought to be locked up, you," he says. "Frigging mentalist."

"That's right," I roar. "Frigging *mentalist*."

Mentalist is an archaic word, meaning mind reader. I do not think this is the meaning the fire-headed boy attaches to it. The youths slip away like phantoms into the further, brighter reaches of the shopping precinct proper.

Blood pounds in my ears, grainy and hot. A moment later I am shivering. Now that the hoodlums are gone, my behaviour seems insane to me.

I could have been killed, I think.

*So what?* says Marielena. *At least you had the balls to tell the truth.*

I don't know if it is the truth, I say to her. They're just kids. Kids with nothing to do and nowhere to go.

Mary has managed to stand the trolley upright. She shuffles around it in a ragged circle, grabbing at the plastic bags, the nameless objects wrapped in newspaper that have tumbled out of it. I move silently to help her, and in the space of a minute or two the shopping cart is full again. It is only then that I realise Mary is crying.

"Do you have anywhere you can go?" I say. I feel suddenly helpless, coerced now into feelings I have no room for. "Somewhere safe?"

She shakes her head. "I'm scared. Scared they'll come back."

"They won't come back," I say, and immediately loathe myself for lying to her. For they will come back, of course they will. No one knows that better than I do. They *always* come back. That's the rule.

"I know a place," I say. "I can take you there, if you like." I reach out to touch her arm. She is shaking all over, a continuous minute trembling, as if an electric current were pulsing through her body. I do not know what I will do if she refuses to follow me – I suppose I shall have to leave her here – but after a second's hesitation she begins to move. Her hands grip the handle of the shopping cart so tightly they seem welded to it. Strands of her hair poke from beneath the woollen cap like some kind of left over packaging material. I lead her slowly through the streets, away from the shopping precinct and through the weed-choked underpass that tunnels beneath the ring road and on to Rowntree Road. Mary says not a word. We go side by side, the wheels of the trolley rattling as they struggle with the uneven pavements. The cracks between the paving stones sprout thickly with weeds: dandelion, groundsel, chicory. It is the first time since leaving my country that I have walked side by side with anyone. I find it hard to say if it makes me feel stronger, or more exposed.

The place I am taking her to might be called a hostel, but it isn't, not properly, it is just a suburban terraced house where people can sometimes go when they have nowhere else. I know of a Syrian, a teacher like myself, whose house was burned down with his three younger brothers still inside. His application for asylum was finally rejected after eight months of waiting. I don't know where he is now, but I do know he was safe here, at least for a while. If they can find a place for Mary, even for a single night, it might make a difference. At least I will feel as if I have done something.

I ring the doorbell and we wait. Eventually someone comes, a black woman wearing dungarees and gold earrings in the shape of roses.

"You two together?" She looks curiously from me to Mary and then back again. I shake my head, feeling slightly ashamed. I don't want to disown Mary, but I don't want to claim her, either.

"It's just Mary," I say. "I showed her how to get here. She needs help."

"That's all well and good, but we can't take the trolley. We don't have room. No trolleys, no pushcarts, no bicycles."

The woman compresses her lips. Mary makes a small whimpering sound. I see her knuckles go white as she retightens her grip on the shopping cart.

"That's all right," I say quickly. "I'll look after it for you." It is the only thing I can think of to say. I have no desire to take possession of the trolley, none at all, but I want even less to be left standing outside on the street with Mary. I feel tired suddenly, more tired than I would have expected for the time of day. All I want is to return to Davenport Street, to make myself a cup of tea and write in my journal. Mary is scrutinising me with suspicion. Her hazel eyes gleam like agates.

"You'll bring it back?" she says.

"I'll bring it first thing tomorrow morning. There's no need to worry."

"You can have anything you like," she says. She turns abruptly away from me and towards the woman in the dungarees, who passes an arm around Mary's shoulders and leads her inside. The door closes behind them. The street falls silent.

I gaze up at the house, taking note of its worn paintwork, the taped-over letter box, the cracked blue china door plaque with the number 40. After a minute or two I walk away, pushing the trolley. It surprises me, what a comfort it is, to have something to lean on.

Mary's trolley takes up almost all the free floor space in my room. It is now impossible to get to the wash basin or the wardrobe. I sit cross-legged on the bed, eating the last scraps of a vegetable samosa I purchased on my way back to Davenport Street and hoping there is nothing in the shapeless agglomeration of bags, rags and balled-up newspapers that is likely to get me into trouble with the landlord. It is strange. Now that I am back here I want to go out again. Out on to the streets, down to the canal, anywhere but here. It is having the trolley in my room that makes me feel this way. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it is true. It is almost as if the trol-

ley were another person, watching me, judging me, listening to my thoughts, even.

I cannot escape the sense that I am not alone.

In the end, I do the only thing I can do, and unpack the trolley. I tell myself I am doing this for Mary, that bringing order to her possessions may help restore some order to her life. Marielena is having none of it.

*Bollocks you are.* It is the first I have seen of her since I yelled at those hoodlums. *You want to know what's in there, that's all. I'd be careful what you wish for, if I were you.*

You can talk, I mutter. Marielena can't stand secrets and she knows it. Unless they're her own, that is. When it comes to the pursuit of gossip, nothing gets in her way. Up to and including nuclear war.

I pile Mary's clothes into a dustbin liner and take them to the laundrette at the far end of Lyle Street, near the eight-til-late supermarket. The wash costs me two pounds, the drier another three. It is all the money I have left from this week's allowance, but I do not regret it. There is a unique satisfaction to be found in the transformation of these ugly rags into clothing that is faded and threadbare but at least clean and wearable. Three hooded sweatshirts, a green cardigan, a denim jacket, two men's shirts, a selection of underwear and a pair of jeans that started out so filthy I believed at first that they were made of cardboard.

When the drier has completed its cycle I take each item and fold it gently back into the bin bag.

This at least is something I can do for her, a simple service performed honestly and without the desire to profit by it. As for the rest though, Marielena is right, I will not sleep tonight. I can imagine myself already, pushing forward into the small hours like a lost traveller into a forest of hawthorn trees, looking for pathways that have become overgrown, or else never existed in the first place.

There's a mobile phone. Or at least I think that's what it is – it's difficult to tell for certain, because I can't turn it on. The design is different from any model I've seen advertised, and



the make – *Redaction?* – is unknown to me. The device is approximately the size of a credit card and of the same thickness. It feels heavy in my hand, though what it is made of – metal, glass, some kind of ceramic? – I have no idea. Its surface is completely smooth, like an iPhone or an Android. There is no obvious way of activating it, no visible charging port. I turn it over and over in my hands, probing it gently with my fingers, but it remains inert. It could be that it is broken, but I don't think so. The device looks brand new.

There is a passport in the name of Mary Eleanor Truelove. The blue cover is faded and scuffed. The pages inside are dog eared, but not torn. The photograph shows a woman with straight brown shoulder-length hair, a wide, slightly lopsided mouth and hazel eyes. I gaze at this photograph for a long time, trying to convince myself it is Mary I am looking at – Mary as I have encountered her – but the truth is I cannot.

The passport says that Mary's date of birth is January 14th, 2035. I flick back and forth through the pages, looking carefully at the date stamps, the watermarks, the interactive hologram that contains Mary Eleanor Truelove's biosignature. I am searching for an indication that the passport is a fake, that the information within it has been altered in some way, that a mistake has been made. I examine the document for more than an hour, but still I cannot find what I am looking for.

A simple printing error, then? After my repeated and fruitless encounters with the Border Agency, I find I am unable to imagine a world in which the British passport authorities would allow that to happen.

Mary's passport goes on insisting that she hasn't been born yet, that she will not in fact be born for another twenty years.

Sometime towards dusk, I retrieve some of Mary's old newspapers from the waste basket. They are old and damp and brittle but still mostly intact. I lay them carefully on the bed and smooth them flat.

\*

It is the dates as much as the stories that make my head spin.

More than at any time since leaving my village, I feel I am on the verge of losing my mind.

It is long past midnight. I realise I have not eaten, not since the samosa. There is a packet of stale pita bread, tucked into one of the drawers of my poor monster of a dressing table. I lie on my back on the bed, chewing on pita crust and trying to understand what the newspapers and the passport and the new-looking mobile telephone are telling me. The thoughts circle and collide inside my head, travelling many miles but always returning to this same conclusion which, even if it is impossible, is the only one that makes sense.

Mary Eleanor Truelove is from the future.

*Of course she is, dumbass,* says Marielena. *What took you so long?*

But that's not possible, I murmur.

*Why not? When you're running for your life, the impossible and the possible sometimes switch places. You of all people should understand that.* She brushes back a stray strand of hair. *Anyway, she says. No one hides herself away in this shithole unless she has to.*

Finally, at around two o'clock, I fall asleep.

I wake to bright daylight. My father's old stop-watch informs me it is two minutes to eleven. My first thoughts are of Mary, that she will be wondering where her trolley is, that she will be worried. I quickly wash and dress, then set out with the shopping cart, trundling it along Davenport Street in the direction of the Rowntree Road underpass.

When Mary comes to the door, I barely recognise her. The awful coat is gone and she has washed her hair. She looks younger, more like the woman in the passport photograph.

"Noah," she says. She glances over my shoulder, looking for the trolley, which is parked by the kerb.

"I can hang on to it, if you like," I say. "If you want to stay here another night, I mean?"

She shakes her head. "I'll be all right." She comes out on to the step. "Thank you for helping me." She takes my face between her hands and kisses me, presses her lips against my mouth in a way that is intimate and so familiar. Familiar from the nights in the mountains, when the air was filled to bursting with the sound of crickets, perfumed with the entwined scents of incense and *retsina*. Marielena would come to me then, she would throw herself upon me like a maenad. I smelled the blood on her hands and did not care.

I would fall asleep to the sound of my poems, thudding on the walls of my skull like the hoof beats of mustangs.

"There'll be good news for you today," Mary says. Her hands and nails are clean and her hair smells of apple shampoo. "You mustn't let those people get to you. Not ever. You're stronger than they are."

I want to ask her about her passport but I don't quite dare.

"Where will you go?" I say instead.

"Not the canal. Not yet, anyway." She laughs. "Don't worry about me. The city will be safe for some time yet. But if I want to try and help change what is coming, it has to be now. That's why I came back here. Do you understand?"

"You mean the things in the newspapers?"

"There are no newspapers, not any more." She smiles wistfully. "Only in museums."

When I arrive back at Davenport Street, I find the post has been delivered. On the table in the hallway there is a long, brown envelope, stamped with the initials and logo of the Border Agency. It is addressed to me.

I take it to my room, and place it on the polished glass kidney-shaped surface of my comrade the dressing table.

It is some time before I find the courage to open it, but in the end I do.

---

Nina Allan's TTA Novella *Spin* won the BSFA Award for Best Short Fiction in 2014, and is shortlisted for the British Fantasy Award for Best Novella (the results will be known by the time you read this). Her first novel, *The Race*, set in an alternate south east England, is available now from NewCon Press, and is reviewed in this issue. Nina lives and works in rural North Devon.

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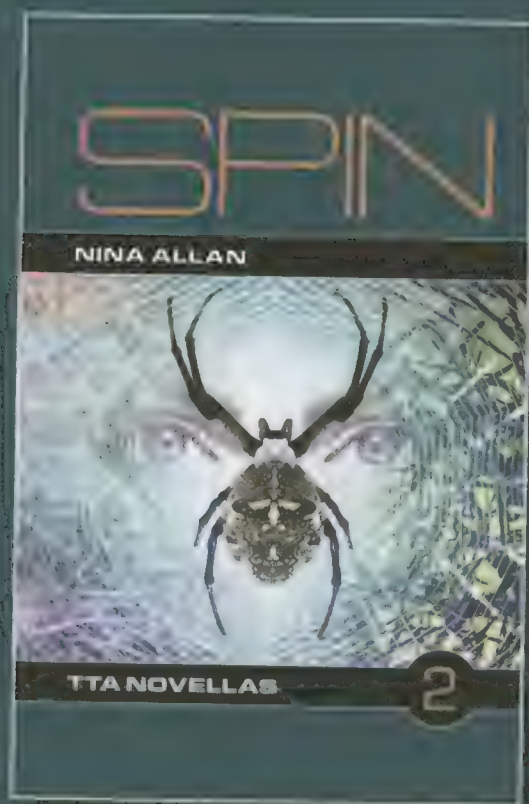
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# JAY O'CONNELL

# A MINUTE AND A HALF

ILLUSTRATED BY DANIEL BRISTOW-BAILEY

I contemplated the unfinished piece dominating the studio corner of my studio apartment. Six foot two inches of swirling curvilinear blackness speckled with pinprick points of light, like stars.

Not.

Quite.

Right.

Still and always unfinished.

I liked working in the Utrecht Modeling Field, that this thing wasn't virtual, you could see the sculpture with the naked eye. It wasn't augmented reality, an overlay – it was real. Ferro-carbon buckyballs suspended in shaped electromagnetic fields generated by room-temperature superconductors in the base...or something. I'm no scientist.

The field occupied a ten foot tall cylinder of space between two three foot diameter plates mounted floor and ceiling. I could work the stuff with my bare hands, without datagloves. The modeling material was neutrally buoyant at sea level, so it didn't take much to hold it in place. I could output replicas at any scale, and license the work through a network of Utrecht platforms installed in banks, insurance companies, and other tedious evil institutions all over the world.

Something tickled the back of my knee. I stepped away and frowned at the churning maelstrom that had engulfed the base of the piece.

Faith, my four year old daughter, had awoken prematurely from her afternoon nap, slipped out of the futon we shared, and toddled over. I recognized the look in her eye, the concentration, as she stood at the edge of the field, her tiny fists pummeling the modeling compound.





She looked like her mother, when she'd painted. I knelt, meeting her eye. Faith smiled wickedly. I only made art when she was sleeping. I was there for her when she was awake.

"Ta-da!" Faith's hands shot up in victory. "All done!" We high-fived.

I hoisted her onto my shoulders, her pink pajamaed legs hanging down around my neck. She ran her fingers over my scalp. A great shoulder rider, she expertly shifted her weight, her center of balance, as I fiddled with the controls at the base of the Utrecht.

I collapsed the field. I'd rather have worked with traditional materials, clay, steel, wood, but the modeling field was the kind of compromise that made sense, living in one of the highest rent city-states planetside.

It was the kind of compromise that sane people made.

I got out the play dough and sat cross-legged beside her. Faith made a series of blue blobby people followed by a green mound, and placed the blue blobs carefully on the green hillock.

Her smile faltered. She brought her fist down. Stony-faced, she pounded the hill into a pancake with blue polka dots.

"Ta-da," she said sadly.

Within minutes, she was asleep with play dough clutched in both hands, her head in her lap. I carried her to the futon, put away the unused dough, and reloaded my sculpture. I kind of liked the soaring ovoids emerging from Faith's chaos...but it still wasn't finished.

Before Faith, I was a different man. A life-logger, an artist and a bipolar, narcissistic fuck. I missed that guy, sometimes, oddly. He was dead and gone, buried inside me, and I have a hard time understanding the things he did, and why he did them, but this is as much his story as it is mine.

This is how he died.

I hadn't thought I'd ever see Helen again.

But there she stood, on our front porch, smiling demonically. She wore a jean jacket over a skintight halter top, a black velvet skirt speckled with glittering cheap nanodiamond rhinestones, her skin fashionably pale. She'd picked up a little weight around her hips, a little rounded white

belly, but she was still long and mostly lean. She wasn't wearing the navel ring anymore.

Still breathtaking.

"Helen," I said. "Uhhhh."

"You lost your hair!" she wailed. "How disappointing!"

I ran my hand through the quarter inch fuzz lining my skull. I had a bad autoimmune reaction to the cheap implants, and regenerating the follicles from my own stem cells was expensive, so I'd just gone with the look.

"You look old." She took a step closer. She'd accumulated a fine webbing of lines at the corners of her eyes herself, I noticed.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I deprogrammed myself."

Sylvia made a gentle, questioning sound from the bedroom. She always fell back asleep for awhile, afterwards. I closed the door behind me, stepping out on the porch.

I felt dizzy. My morning coffee backed up a little bit, a bitterness at the back of my throat. "Your last text said I would burn eternally in hell."

"I was mad at you."

"You told me you'd never see me again."

Helen put her hands on my shoulders. Her eyes weren't blue or green exactly, but some impossible shade in between. I recognized her scent.

"I lied," she said.

"Don't do this." I insist I said that.

She kissed me, her mouth opening, her tongue at once familiar and new. I ran my hand through her short, brown hair, my neck pivoting back the ten degrees needed to really kiss Helen right. She was six feet two, after all, a full two inches taller than me.

A tiny voice piped "Is he my logical father?"

I nearly bit our tongues off.

The toddler had been hiding behind her skirt. Helen started to laugh, hard, braying like a horse. I'd enjoyed her laugh, though it had embarrassed me in public. She drooled a little, she was laughing so hard. She wiped it on her jacket sleeve and swooped the little girl into her arms.

"Yes! He's your bio-logical father. Evan, I'd like you to meet your daughter, Faith."

The girl was small, waist-high, like kids are, dressed in a cute blue denim dress and mud-



spattered white tights. Blonde hair, blue eyes, but all kids have those, right? She looked familiar. Very familiar. She'd been eating chocolate, or something like it, from the smudges on her cheeks. She smiled, revealing perfect teeth like white chicklets pressed into pink bubblegum. Her eyes were huge and placid.

"Impossible." I tried to take a step back, encountered something hard, the door I'd closed behind me. "You, we. Us. Us. Ten years."

I'd lost syntax. I felt cold.

"She froze your sperms," Faith said solemnly.

"You were always talking about getting a vasectomy. You never did, did you?" Helen said.

I shook my head. "Frozen," I repeated. "Sperm," I added. "Ahh."

"Men always talk about vasectomies. They never get them."

"Oh."

"Men don't like little knives down there, do they?"

"My."

"Teeth don't scare you, though, for some reason. Good thing. That's how I got your sample. That last date we had. Popped it in the freezer."

"God."

"Leave God out of this!" Helen frowned and set Faith down again. The little girl started fiddling with the beaded sash around Helen's hips. "My Enclave is starving themselves to death. We've had three, count them three, failed Raptures. How many times can you shiver in the cold waiting to be taken and not feel like an idiot? But I couldn't leave, either. So I found a BlackNet server. I bought a metaprogrammer, asked it to figure out what I really wanted. That would be you, Evan. Cheer up."

"I can't leave Sylvia," I said. "Not after all she's done to me. For me. I could never forgive myself."

Helen fished around in a silvered purse. "Silly. The metaprogrammers do the forgiving. I've got a car, a gun, and two million in cash, off-shore digital. I did accounting for the Enclave. If they go through with the suicide, they won't need the money. If they don't—" she shrugged—"they get what they deserve for being assholes."

"Assholes," Faith piped up from Helen's knee.

"Assholes." We all agreed. The Enclave sucked.

"We're headed to Galt," Helen said. "I'll buy us Oceanian passports. We can't be extradited. Wanna come?"

I chewed my lip. A habit I dislike in other people. "I can't."

"Don't be stupid, Evan. You can do anything you want to. You won't feel guilt. Just take this."

She held out a single capsule crawling with microprint. I took it from her and read the tiny black animated letters.

*Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law,* it read.

He went with her. Can you believe it?

"Why?" I asked.

Helen sped through the gatehouse of our complex. My bare feet gritted against the SUV's filthy carpeting, rustling through sedimentary layers of fast-food takeout bins and collapsed drink bulbs.

"Why what?" Helen didn't look at me.

Faith was babbling something in the back, bouncing up and down in her carseat. I wondered what I meant, too.

"Why me?" I decided on. "You married...what was his name?"

"Dean. Who turned out to be sterile."

"Did he know? I mean, about Faith not being his?"

Helen laughed. "Christ no! Faith was our miracle child. I guess I wanted something to remember you by."

"You said I'd burn in hell."

"You probably will," Helen said with a half smile. "At least we'll have each other."

I pondered that. The car smelled bad, that kid smell, pee and car sickness. My left foot encountered something sticky. I repressed a shudder.

"You have a slate?"

"Glove compartment," she said. "Who you wanna call?"

"Who do you think?"

"Oh. Sure." Helen frowned. "I can't believe you left her really. Did you take the programmer yet?"

"No. I'm not sure I want to. I haven't felt right since I took the cure. Since then I've felt happy about nothing. Just happy to be alive, you know?"

Helen nodded. "Pharmteks tinker with neurotransmitters. They can't really change you. It's like emulating a new personality in software. Metaprogrammers change the hardware. The wetware. It's permanent, and there's no cognitive dissonance."

"How do I know I'm still me afterwards?"

"You don't. Sharp tools. So think clearly about what you ask for."

"What did you do to yourself?"

Helen's eyes scanned the road. "I'm who I always wanted to be."

"I'm hungry, Mom," Faith piped from the back seat. "I have to pee."

"I'm free," Helen whispered.

Dear Sylvia,

*I want to say I'm sorry, but I always say I'm sorry, and I keep doing these things, so I guess it's stupid to apologize. Sorry doesn't mean shit.*

*I've left you.*

*I never wanted to take the cure. I haven't felt right since. I don't think I'm meant to feel good, somehow. I'm sorry I didn't tell you this years ago. I guess I didn't know.*

*I take responsibility for being a prick. I fully expect you'll hate me forever. I'll be lucky if you don't put a BlackNet hit out on me. Maybe you should.*

*The weird thing is, I love you. But being with you was killing me. I don't know what to say. Everything I had is yours. I know it isn't much. Take the joint checking account. Take it all.*

*I'm sorry.*

*Damn. I wasn't going to say that.*

*Evan*

I thumbprinted this kilobyte of lameness and hit send. My stomach was doing 360s. I immediately wanted to take the message back. I fumbled around with a cancel command, but the mail server said that the message had already passed out of its domain.

"Oh God," I said.

"You mailed her?" Helen asked. "No turning back now."

"No turning back," Faith echoed.

"No," I said. "Turning back. Now."

I did a search on Helen's Enclave. I'd not

checked on them in years. They'd gotten crazier, more militant as the end times had come and gone twice over the last five years. Accusations of gun running, unlicensed recombinant genetic work. Standoffs with child protective services. A missing journalist, presumed dead. She'd stolen money from these people?

Helen's Kia fell into the turnpike's control grid, and she retracted the steering wheel and turned to me, shaking her head.

"Gee," she said. "I hope we still like each other."

## METAPROGRAMMING FAQ

*Metaprogrammers are GHOSTWARE, black market nanofactured pharmaceuticals covered with animated digital ink. BlackNet dealers claim they are the products of renegade VLAI (Very Large Artificial Intelligence), and contain the machinery to resculpt human wetware in accordance to user input parameters. Skeptics claim the pills are nothing but short-acting synthetic canniboloid derivatives, hallucinogens, and that any lasting effect is a placebo response.*

*Anecdotal reports of scanning-tunneling-microscopy conflict. Some samples have reportedly contained unrecognizable nanomachines. Some samples have contained only hallucinogens. Some samples have contained both. Anecdotal rumor that numerous artistic and scientific prodigies of recent years are the creation of metaprogrammers remain unsubstantiated.*

*Use of metaprogrammers is opposed by every organized government and religion on the planet. Standing death threats and spontaneous terrorist activity directed at anyone involved in the production, distribution, or promotion of metaprogrammers have led to a worldwide prohibition of all VLAI derived consciousness altering substances.*

*The pills are still widely available.*

I read the FAQ again, shaking my head.

"I can't believe you took this stuff."

"I didn't want Faith to die... I didn't want to die. I couldn't renounce God. The situation was impossible. Mostly, I didn't want to die. That was



most important. Does that sound bad? That I cared more about myself than my daughter?"

I glanced back, hoping Faith was asleep. She wasn't. I shrugged at her helplessly. She made a growling noise.

"I love the kid, don't get me wrong," Helen said, "but to be honest, she can be a pain in the ass. We'll have help in Oceania. We'll indenture a servant to take care of her. A ten year contract goes for a few hundred bucks. I'll go back to my painting."

Oceania. Did I want to go to Oceania? I mainly wanted to leave Sylvia. The libertarian free-state was supposedly a decent place to live, if you had money, and weren't bothered by things like indentured servitude.

"I've missed you," Helen was saying, "I never knew it when I was in the compound, but after I took the programmer, I knew."

Helen's slate pinged. I retrieved it from the glove box, flinching at the sight of the blinking mail icon. A message from Sylvia, video. I shuddered. I contemplated doing a voice-to-text, so I could read the message rather than see her face, and then hit the play button to punish myself for being such a shit.

She'd been crying, her eyes red and swollen. Her hair was still messed up from our morning sex.

"You prick!"

I swallowed bile.

"You shit! You asshole! You're blaming me for the pharmtek, aren't you? You were miserable! You were sick and I told you to go the doctor and you leave me for that? You're pathetic!"

"That was Helen you left with, wasn't it? I replayed the porch security cam. Christ, Evan, you didn't even like her, let alone love her. You told me you argued all the time, and she was selfish in bed."

Helen frowned at me, then glared at Sylvia on screen. I grimaced. Man.

"She didn't know what she wanted! Why do you think anything will be any different. Oh, why am I talking to you at all?"

She sniffed. "Your daughter looks cute. If I'd known you'd wanted one... Never mind! I hate you!"

She looked into the camera, her expression

empty.

"Come home. This isn't the way to do anything. We'll talk about it. Come home. Now."

The message ended. I was shivering and wanted to die. I dug around in my pants pocket, dug out a few five dollar coins and the metaprogrammer. I gulped it down dry.

"You took the pill?" Helen said.

I nodded.

"You'll feel better in about five minutes." She licked her lips, and kissed me, her hands stroking the front of my jeans, tugging down the zipper. Just as the warmth started to rise, I caught a glimpse of Faith out of the corner of my eye in the rear-view mirror, her tongue fully extended.

She had a remarkably long tongue, for a child. I pushed Helen's hand away. Not in front of the kid—

The Kia hit a bump, and the rear windshield pinged. I craned my neck to see the tiny hole whistling there, at the center of a glistening spiderweb. There was a matching hole in the front windshield, higher, and to the left.

Bullet holes. Someone shooting. A small popping sound over the hiss of the highway, like champagne being opened in the next hotel room.

"Oh shit." Helen thumped the dash, extending the steering column. "Off-program! Emergency override!"

A blue sedan with darkened windows was gaining on us, a dozen car lengths back. There came a sound like a soda can being speared by a sharpened tire iron. Another one. Helen turned the wheel hard right, thudding me into her shoulder as Faith started screaming. The car fishtailed into the far right lane, decelerating.

"Your flock wants its money back!" I shouted.

"The gun! Under your seat!"

Helen hit the accelerator, throwing me back as a second bullet hole blossomed on the passenger side of the windshield where my head had been a second before. I rooted through the garbage. My hand closed on something metallic and sticky and I withdrew a polished slab of chrome with a crosscut latex handle slathered with what I guessed was pink yogurt. I'd fired a gun, once, in the woods behind my grandfather's cabin – I'd lifted it from his dresser drawer without asking. I'd put my thumb in the exact wrong place. The

bolt coming back had broken it instantly.

Traffic purred around us serenely, still on program, a grid of passenger cars and truck-trains, most with opaqued windows. People were napping or watching video inside. We were tooling through the Jersey free-zone, a ten mile strip of land too polluted to be of use to anyone, a ring around the port complex at Galt.

Helen dodged through the grid. The dash lit up, blinking red and yellow. The car's brain was full of overrides – more BlackNet stuff, or she wouldn't be able to drive at all on the pike. I fumbled for the gun's safety, flicked it back and forth a few times fast. I then had no idea which position was which.

"They'll need an account number and my password to get their money back. They're trying to scare us," Helen shouted.

"It's working!" I shouted. "They may need you, but they don't need me. Or Faith."

Helen was making her own lane out of the gravel shoulder, passing car after car. A gray-haired woman in a tiny smart car gave us the finger. We thumped over a cast-off tire tread and fishtailed. I bit my tongue, tasting blood, as another bullet took out the window on Helen's side of the car.

We all screamed.

My hand was tingling. I stared at the gun drizzling smoke from its short barrel. I'd shot the steering wheel, the bullet ripping through the airbag, triggering a secondary explosion. My heart was doing strange, painful things. I'd almost blown Helen's brains out. Blood trickled from both her nostrils as she wrestled with the wheel. A howl of wind and traffic hiss filled the car, and that rhythmic throbbing you get when you open one window but not the other.

I cracked my window to equalize the pressure. "Shoot at them, you idiot!"

"The assholes!" Faith wailed. "Assholes!"

I leaned back and checked her for damage, trying to avoid looking into her bulging eyes. The top left corner of her carseat was missing, sheared clean off.

"Stay in the seat," I yelled. She ignored me, wriggling horribly.

Helen ground her teeth. "Shoot back! We're six miles from the checkpoint!"

My first shot went wild. Was it possible I'd killed some innocent person ten cars back? I braced the gun in both hands, resting the stock on the baby seat – Faith had slipped the harness and made it to the floor and was burrowing through the trash, shrieking continuously.

The gun bucked in my hand with every pull of the trigger. The sedan's windshield starred, and I shouted "Yes!" Another shot hit the windshield, and another.

I was clicking off rounds as fast as possible, screaming like a happy redneck when a tire burst, sending us into the guardrail. At our fantastically inappropriate speed, the rail tore like tissue paper, and the car flipped over into the drainage ditch. Time slowed down.

We were in free fall. I looked back.

Faith floated in midair in a constellation of fast food garbage. Through the rear windshield, the horizon slowly rotated 360 degrees.

Crash balloons blossomed throughout the cabin with the stench of gunpowder.

My head hit something, hard, and I blacked out.

.....  
"YOU ARE BLEEDING TO DEATH. DO YOU WANT TO BLEED TO DEATH?"

The voice came from somewhere over my left shoulder. I twisted, sending daggers of pain through my ribcage, many things broken inside. Many. More blood than I thought I had in my body soaked my jeans and my flannel shirt, which was warm and stiff and reeked of copper. There was a shard of bloody plastic jammed into my left thigh. It didn't hurt as much as I thought it should. The crash balloons had deflated.

Beside me, Helen lay motionless. I pushed my fingers into her neck, and thought I felt a pulse.

"I don't want to bleed to death." I pulled the shard out of my thigh. The wound pulsed dark blood once, then stopped.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?"

The voice wasn't coming from over my shoulder. It was inside my head, quiet and infinitely gentle.

I smelled gasoline.

"I want to do the right thing," I croaked. There came a rustling from behind, a soft moan. Faith wasn't dead. Yet.



"DO WHAT IS RIGHT FOR YOURSELF, OR FOR OTHERS?"

I knew what it meant by others. The people around me now. "Both. Myself and others."

"BOTH IS IMPOSSIBLE. COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT NECESSARY."

"Do it."

"COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT MAY NOT CORRELATE WITH HAPPINESS—"

"Do it!"

"EXECUTING."

People were walking around outside the car. Shiny black shoes, and dark pant legs swished around us. The Kia was still in one piece, upside down, tipped up with its hood ornament crushed into the tarmac. Damn safe car.

"Fix me," I subvocalized. "Make me strong. Fast. Make me fearless." I closed my eyes.

"Make me a good person." Somehow, in that instant, I knew exactly what being a good person was, as if I'd always known, somewhere, deep down inside. I knew what I was saying, I knew what I meant.

"EXECUTING," the voice inside repeated.

I fumbled through the garbage and broken glass littering the car's roof. There was no chance in the world I'd find the gun. I knew that.

I did anyway. I checked the magazine. It held three bullets, plus the one in the chamber.

There was a splashing sound. The people attached to the legs were pouring something over the car. Gasoline. So help me, I expected them to ask for Faith, to save her and kill me. But they didn't.

Faith crawled towards me along the roof, blood streaking her face like Apache warpaint.

I held my finger to my lips. I had a few broken ribs, and a gash in my left thigh that had nicked my femoral artery. Which had stopped bleeding for no reason at all. Nanomachines?

Unseen hands pulled Hellen's body through the broken side window.

"She's alive," a man's voice, flat, affectless.

I took a deep breath. I felt different. Clearer, somehow. Was the metaprogrammer still active? "I need to save this girl. My daughter."

"OPTIMIZE YOUR IDENTITY FOR THE GIRL'S SURVIVAL?"

"Yes," I said.

"Torch the car," someone outside said.

"EXECUTING," the voice said.

I had a gun with four bullets.

I moved faster than I thought was possible.

I did the right thing.

There had been a time when a spectacular two car accident would have snarled traffic for twenty miles back. The curiosity factor, they called it on the traffic reports, the Lookie Lous. The traffic control program didn't allow for such things. Only a few people noticed the wreckage in the ditch at the side of the road. The two burning cars – one filled with four dead bodies, each man with a single bullet hole in the center of his forehead.

Helen, Faith and I huddled together in a sticky blanket I'd found in the back seat, waiting for the EMTs. Helen had wrapped herself around Faith. I had my arms around them both.

After I'd shot out Helen's airbag, she'd hit the steering wheel hard enough to crush her ribcage visibly. She'd vomited more blood than I imagined existed inside a human body. I had no idea why she was still alive. Nanomachines?

Helen demanded I find her slate, which oddly was still working. I pinged the EMTs. I contracted a medevac. Oceania had no extradition treaty with the Commonwealth. If they arrived before the Troopers, we'd be home free. They were seven minutes away on the map, a pulsing blue dot making a bee line for our crosshair.

Helen's bloody forefinger moved slowly, deliberately, over the tablet.

A video window popped up. A Las Vegas marriage mill.

I'd proposed to Helen, once. A long time ago. She'd said she'd get back to me. She'd never spoken to me again. Just the one letter, about how I'd burn in hell.

Helen coughed. I used my shirt to clear the blood from the slate. Faith was keening softly in her arms, her face buried in her right armpit.

I explained our situation to the alarmed looking woman at the marriage mill. She nodded, recovering quickly. She had done this kind of thing twice before. Once with a couple climbing Everest, who'd been caught in an unlucky storm.

The ceremony took four minutes. We used the old words instead of improvising modern vows, as we were pressed for time. Till death do us part. The biometric scans, thumbprints and retinas, and witnessing took another two. I heard the EMT copter in the distance.

Helen looked into my eyes. "This was never going to work."

I shrugged. "I don't know about that."

"I loved you," she said.

"Everything is going to be OK," I said, rather than lie.

She nodded. "You'll be a better father than I was a mother, I'll bet. You always were a buzzkill."

I kissed her forehead. We embraced, the three of us, our little, hastily assembled family.

The marriage lasted for a minute and a half.

I'd used half of Helen's cash, the Enclave's money, to pay my way into Oceania with Faith. Helen's people had called off the mass starvation. I returned half their money via a BlackNet anonymous transaction.

A million doesn't buy much in Oceania. First and last month's rent on a one room studio in

one of the artists' arcologies. Power, HVAC, data, and the voluntary security payment ate up most of it. I was going to skip the 'voluntary' payment, Oceania has very little crime, but it turns out that people who don't make the voluntary payments suffer strange accidents. That's Oceania for you in a nutshell: honest extortion. And weirdly, I liked it. It reminded me of the nineteenth century, but with computers and dentistry.

I rebooted the modeling field and loaded the sculpture. The memorial. I played the history file as a loop, watching the thing take form, shift and grow. Saw it erupt into chaos as Faith demolished the base.

It was finished, but it wasn't static. Each form led logically, inevitably, to the next. It had to be animated, a loop, which I completed by finishing the destruction that Faith had started, and morphing that cloud of star speckled dust back into the starting state as an orrery of black and silver spheres.

People come to sculpture for permanence, understand. For something that stands against time. There was no paying market for this kind of thing. No bank would want this for the office

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lobby. Too distracting. Disturbing. Messy.

It was undoubtedly the best thing I'd ever made. But it was only for me.

Faith woke up screaming.

Second best. I powered down the field.

"I dreamed about Mommy," she said. "She was dead and bloody. There were monsters. Monsters! Where were you? Where were you?"

"I was there." I brushed the fine blonde hair out of her eyes. "I'm always there. There aren't any monsters," I told her. "Just assholes." Faith cried at that, and I tried to hold her. She didn't want to be held, and bit my arm, hard enough to inscribe a little semicircle of marks, leaking blood in places. I backed off and waited, sitting cross-legged a few feet away on the bed.

She kicked and punched the futon for awhile, wailing like a banshee, and finally lay, sobbing and shuddering amidst the twisted sheets. These tantrums were coming farther and farther apart. I'd actually graphed them out, so I knew for sure.

I'd considered dosing Faith with metaprogrammers and telling her to forget her mother and be happy. Amazing, what we think to do to the people we love.

"I'm hungry," she wailed, finally.

I arranged her clothes, and patted her hair down a little. Good enough. "Let's go eat, then." There was a cafe we both liked down the street, EM shielded. You couldn't even get a phone call there. I loved the place.

Faith's eyes looked very blue, rimmed with red still, but she'd stopped crying. She smiled her perfect teeth, and snorted.

"You're a good monster," Faith said. She'd probably be crying again in a little while. And happy again, sometime later.

I wiped her nose. "You're a good little girl," I said.


She shrugged. She knew that.

So we went out and ate.

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Jay O'Connell lives in Cambridge, MA with his wife, two teenage children, cats, books, and computers. He's been a construction worker, market researcher, fast-food slave, tech boom software executive, graphic designer, GLBTQ activist, and serial entrepreneur. You can find him on the web at [www.jayoconnell.com](http://www.jayoconnell.com), and read his fiction in recent issues of *Asimov's*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Fantastic Stories*, and a smattering of worthy small press and web-based publications.

# BLACK STATIC



**T**he world inside of Manaia's Tattoory is dim. I smell paint, the old-fashioned kind that can still be smelt. Framed watercolours drape from nails driven into the brick walls. I stare longest at the painting of a woman; above her hips she is whole, but her skin blows away from the bones of her legs like dandelion fluff. It makes me glad for my own skin. My skeleton is laced with knobs and scarred by surgeons' saws, a thing best hidden beneath flesh.

The tattooist sits alone in the lamplight. She paints a triceratops reaching for the branches of

a willow on an otherwise empty canvas, bringing out the scales from quick flicks of her wrist. A menagerie of barrettes and tufts studs her skull. Through the quietness I hear my uneven gait all too loudly as I approach her. I cannot walk anywhere without the reminder of my deformed toes. She pulls her glasses over her eyes and swirls her brush in the water of an old jam jar. "What do you have for me, pumpkin?" She gives me a smile and a looking-over.

I slip my sponsorship page onto her desk and it brightens the room. Her smile falls as the glasses





## S.L. NICKERSON

S.L. Nickerson's writing has appeared in *Analog*, *Kalidatope*, *Pulp Lit*, *The Colored Lens*, and *The Prairie Journal*, with an upcoming short story in *Tesseract* 18. Currently, she is working on her PhD thesis in astrophysics at the University of Zürich. Her job involves playing with galaxies like toys, and real life unfolds for her like a science fiction story.

rise again over her hair. "Silver Steed Screens. They are sponsoring like mad, I did another for them last week. And you are Dalisay. It's a complete pleasure. I'm Manaia, that's my name over the shop. Make yourself comfortable while I find the cartridge."

There are some wall hooks, hand-painted fish tails, onto which I hang my shirt. I lay myself on the inclined bench and reach back to part my bra, exposing my back and its many scars and brands. I rest my chin on my knuckles.

"You've done this before." She snatches up a cartridge from her drawer and returns to me. I stare at her stockings with envy, blue lace curled into geometric shapes. I could not slip into those without boring holes. "Too many times before. I won't ask what you have, if it makes you uncomfortable. Some of my clients tell me a lot, even about the exhibitions, but you don't strike me as up for chatter. That's okay." Her hand is cool between my shoulder blades. "It's a pity."

"All that matters is if you've done this before," I say.

"Of course, of course." Her finger rests on the brand beneath my left shoulder blade. "What is Saturn Enterprises?"

"Silicone manufacturers."

Her hand withdraws, leaving my back longing. She shows me the cartridge's design: two entwined stallions. There is no slogan or company name. The most successful ones like Silver Steed Screens are only logo.

"Is the cartridge okay, pumpkin?" Manaia asks.

"I wish my answer mattered." I realise her stockings are tattoos.

"You and me both! It's an artless abomination, turning tattoos into stamps."

I hear her hauling the apparatus along the ceiling tracks above me, squeaking like rusted gears. I don't need to turn around to know what it is: one long, shiny gun points at my back. Manaia clicks it on and it hums. She slides in the cartridge.

"I am sorry if this stings you," she says.

"It'll hurt less than the webbed bone between my ribs does right now."

The gun's beam punches me in the back, its lasers penetrating my flesh, imprinting the stallions just above my surgeon's dotted line. The beam bathes the room in a blue glow. It seals the

ink on the bottom of my skin and cauterises my wounds. There is no bruising, only a new pigment showing through my skin.

She slides the gun away. As I snatch my shirt, I bump my elbow on a lower hook. I curse.

"Sorry, almost everybody does that," she says, looking only a little concerned. "I've been meaning to move it."

I free a syringe-jet from my waist pack, and shoot it into my elbow. "I don't have everyone's body."

My body is my battlefield, and my mind its captive.

"Vodka, straight," I say. Neon light flares off the glass as the bartender slides it towards me. I down it in one gulp.

A man pretends to read in a booth near the back, beneath a cluster of lights bent into a flickering beach ball. His hair is sculpted for maximum waviness, and his free fingers circle the rim of his glass. The rum that fills it is as dark as his hand. For the past half hour he's been stealing looks my way and has not moved a page. The words *wyld vitamins* are scrawled into the back of my neck, and that does not seem to turn him off. I drop my shoulder, and my strap slides off it, passing a scancode. He approaches.

"Who are you?" He claims the stool next to mine.

"I was a sales clerk until two hours ago, then I got fired. My boss wanted me to lift inventory. Couldn't do it. Who are you?"

"You can call me Mr Roy."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Vish Roy. And yours didn't answer mine."

"Dalisay Dumalahay. Why the formality?"

"We've just met."

He suggests his place; I insist on mine. I lock my door behind us, and ignite the candle I keep beside it. In the darkness I know my home, but I still move carefully. Candle-by-candle I light my apartment to unveil its curiosities before him. He makes no comment and I am grateful. Cushions are nailed to the corners of my table and bookshelves, and for chairs I have only beanbags and blowups. My mattress lies on the floor, frameless. This is a play that I have acted many times before, and I know already his role. I go on top



and not a single pretty strand of his hair shifts. I, who control so little of my life, can control this.

Our bodies press parallel valleys into my mattress. His fingers circle my hip and his eyes take in the scars and brands that I have tried to mask in candlelight.

"No one bothers to run marathons or wear bracelets for what I've got," I say. "I wish I had a trendy disease."

"I see that it has made you not so much a bubble-child, more a pillow-child." His thumb sweeps the logo of the bankrupt automotive company, just beside my belly button. "They won't miss that brand."

"The sponsors own this square of skin for my life, not theirs."

He holds my hand in his, and places my palm over his heart. I pet the scar over it, white and taut over his warm chest. "I needed an emergency heart grow when I was a teen," he says.

"Your family was wealthy enough to get you that surgery tattoo-free? You're carrying a whole mansion in your chest."

He chuckles. "No, my father was left with a bill he could never pay. This heart was brought to you by Orso's Authentic Oils."

"How do you get by the exhibitions? They will notice that you erased your tattoo."

"I recreate it with henna. They never look closely enough to tell the difference. I might feel the cold air of the auditorium on my bare bum, but the knowledge that I have tricked them keeps me warm through the whole exhibition."

I make us tea while he admires my bookshelves, and I lean out of the kitchen to admire his bare bum. He chooses *Headhunting in War*, and takes it back to my bed to flip through. I only attempt to form relationships with the men who notice my books.

My doctor's office is eighty storeys up and the windows are double glazed to silence the city. I have a view of Trinity Square and the Public Labyrinth. It has no walls or hedges and is merely made of two colours of stone. When you are on it all you can do is follow the path ahead of you and never turn back.

The paintings on her office walls glow in shades of gauzy crocuses and trembling grass hills, but

not so brightly as to overtake the sunlight from the skylight. The only painting that does not glow is of some trees and rocks, most likely an original Group of Seven though I could never tell them apart. Every pearl around Dr Li's neck glistens in unison with her teeth as she smiles for me. Her lips are stained red.

Across from this stately being I hunch over in my seat, a crunched up creature.

"I need a new prescription for the serum," I tell her.

She touches her prescription pad, and then stops. My heart tows dread through my chest.

"Dalisay, I am so, so sorry. About the surgery."

"I secured my sponsorship, it will be funded." I show her the stallions.

Dr Li's perfectly lined eyes fill with a terrible sadness and I cannot look into them, I must not look into them. When doctors look like this they are as helpless as I am. "It isn't a problem with funding, not directly. I got the results of your blood tests from the lab this morning. You are not cleared for surgery. The ink from the tattoos has run into your bloodstream."

"How is this possible?"

"I messaged the lab to ask them if they were sure. This wasn't a problem with old-fashioned ink tattoos that only partially breached your epidermis. It is these laser tattoos. I am sorry. They were deemed safe for people with fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, but the trials only lasted one year. The research is coming out now that after many years it enters your bloodstream with unintended consequences."

"Consequences?"

"The serum that you inject after accidents and prior to surgery interacts with the laser tattoos, and with every injection you increase the probability of blood clots."

"What am I supposed to fucking do then? I got fired last month, Dr Li. I have a fucking plate of bone welding my ribs together."

"I know, I know." Her eyes are so, so sad and she is so, so sorry. "If it is any comfort, there is a precedent for situations when you secure the sponsorship in good faith, and then the surgery falls through. I will make sure you get paid for the last tattoo without any strings."

"I suppose I should be grateful that my vis-

its to you are still covered by taxes. Or will this change too? Can't you just remove my laser tattoos then?"

"Without the laser tattoos eventually your blood will clear, but I will not risk breaking the funding protocols to do this. However, if you do have a good reason to suspect that your blood clears spontaneously, I'll test it again. Then I'll get you into surgery immediately. In the meantime, I know a great psychologist. She can help you cope with growing a second skeleton."

I know what happens to people with FOP without the serum. Bones fill bruises to entomb our bodies in a single, twisted pose. We become statues that breathe, and any surgery to remove the extra bones will only create more bones. "I don't want to cope," I say. "I want to be cured."

"We both know that is impossible."

I stare at my eyes in the mirror, brown and deep. Those will always move no matter how much the rest of my body locks in place. There is a nugget of sleep in my eye's corner. I lean in for a better look. My arm does not bend. I press my elbow, and find a bone that was not there before. Sometimes the serum works, and sometimes it does not. I aim my syringe-jet at it, finger on the ejector, to stop any others from growing there, and then I remember.

Syringe-jet clatters to the floor. And I scream. I do not care if the whole world hears. I thought that I could have the sort of normal life that so many others drift through without a thought, but that is an illusion. My deformities are secrets sealed beneath my flesh, scored bones with caviar-sized protrusions. The sponsors on my skin will not prize me when my neck and shoulders slowly immobilise and my hips fix my trunk obliquely.

Vish finds me crumpled on the bathroom floor, wedged between toilet and shower cube.

"Your neighbours phoned me." He joins me on the floor and pulls me into his arms. "They heard screams. Did you fall down? Are you hurt? Let me see if you bruised yourself." His hands slide under my shirt and lift it to inspect me.

"Don't fret for me, Mr Roy. I sat gently. Screaming is the only violence I allow myself." I take his hands in mine and kiss them. I need them here

more than checking my back. "What do you do when life holds no more choices?"

"Then you look life in the eye and punch it in the face."

The street we walk down is fenced in by townhouses, right-angular constructions of glass and bricks and wood from the turn of the millennium. This area could be a heritage site if not for the cracking pavements and piles of trash bags. We go up the stairs of one house. Vish raps on the door three times and we wait.

Footsteps sound from within, and pause as the light from the peephole darkens. Locks rattle and the door opens to show a woman's face sliced in two by a chain lock. Shadows deepen in the creases of her forehead and cheeks. Her smallness gives the impression of frailty, but the set of her mouth, the focal point of the wrinkles, tell me differently. She shuts the door.

"Wait," Vish says. "She's in need as I was in need."

The door opens fully. "Here there are no true names and no shoes," says the woman. She leads us within. "Call me Dr Kritikos. I call him Heart Patient. What do I call you?"

"Bone Patient. Are you really a doctor?"

"Not medically."

We leave our shoes on hardwood flooring so polished I can see my reflection. The walls are whitewashed. There are no stains; it is as if they were painted over yesterday. A couch, as white as the walls and still covered in plastic, is the foyer's only furniture. I can't smell a thing, neither chemicals nor rotting body parts. I would not have thought that an illegal medical clinic could be so sterile.

"Where is the bone to be operated on?" she asks.

"Everywhere."

Vish gives me a swift kiss and takes a seat on the couch. I follow Dr Kritikos to the next room.

I undress behind a screen and it feels as if I am undressing my soul. I peel off layers of cloth and they flutter to the wood, soundlessly. There is no sleeve to hide the knob in my elbow. Naked, I cannot pretend.

"What have they done to you, my poor girl? I have never seen anyone with this many laser



tattoos." Dr Kritikos is holding a device. It looks like a camera, but there is no screen at the back. "I'm not a pornographer," she says with an amicable laugh. I can tell that she has made this joke to the others before me. "These photos are for your records only, so that you will remember how to re-create them for the exhibitions. However you do that is your choice."

"Have they caught any of your clients before?"

"I don't know what happens to them. It is better for everyone that way. How many tattoos in total do you have?"

I tell her. She nods. "I can only remove three a session, for your safety," she says. "You'll come back." She names the price. I nod. It is a quarter of the sponsorship I got for my surgery. "Acid, abrasion, or the peel?"

"Since these tattoos are made by laser, can't you also erase them by laser?"

"Are you able to get one of these machines on the black market without a trace? Acid, abrasion, or the peel." She puts her eye to a tube on the camera.

I think on it through our photography session. Every time she takes a photo it prints itself out of the front of this camera. It is very old technology, nothing to leave a digital trace.

Dr Kritikos explains the different procedures to me. My tattoos penetrate my skin, and run deep as the fat that separates it from flesh. She can part my skin by scalpel, then peel it off layer by layer until the muscles beneath are unwrapped. With salt and a brush of crystals, she could wear down my skin and chaff it into flakes. I warn her of my condition, and she chooses the acid for me. The abrasion or the peel could leave bruises deep within me and harden into more bone.

She takes me to the next room. It is as bare as the others: a massage table that she encases in fresh plastic, and a series of white cupboards unlabelled. It hurts my eyes, and I gladly close them after I press my face into the headrest.

"Let's rid you of your stigmata." And so she begins. She holds the sponge in her gloved palm. Her touch is gentle, masked by the agony of the acid. After each press she waits. I hear her whispers. One two three. Through the pain I feel her eyes watch. The acid annihilates my skin and my skin annihilates the acid. She adds a little bit and

never too much. This also is a form of surgery. Her hand controls the acid minutely and she has my trust. She must stop the moment she uncovers muscle.

I don't scream.

Chimes tinker against the glass door of Manaia's Tattoory. She is alone again, painting a water-colour of swallows soaring free from a rabbit hole. I wonder if she ever gets any customers other than the branded. I slide a glowing page onto her desk. It is the contract for my newest sponsorship.

She puts on her glasses and looks at the page before she looks at me. "I dislike seeing my clients again so soon, and I mean this in the nicest way possible."

"Now you can see your pumpkin the way Cinderella does. I'll give you a cut of this," I say. "Can you do my sponsorship in ink?"

Manaia washes her paintbrush in the jam jar, clouding the water. She wipes one hand on her apron, and then the other. A smile pulls her lips wide, the smile of a conspirator. "And they will never find out? You will never tell them that I used needles instead of a laser?"

I pull the photos from my sack, the ones that Dr Kritikos took of my tattoos before the acid.

"Triple vintage. I approve." She seems more interested in the photos' format than their content.

"There's more. I also need for you to reproduce my old laser tattoos, just as you see them in these photos, in ink."

"I won't ask you where they all went, pumpkin."

"And I want a little ink of my own. You're more than a laser technician. I will be a canvas and not a billboard."

She yanks open a drawer that is crammed with papers. Swirls of stars and entwining roses, calligraphy sweeps and music notes flutter. The sketches tumble over the sides. "In one colour or fifty? Words or photos or cartoons? Impressionism, Realism, Surrealism?"

A sheet sways towards the ground and I rest my hand beneath to catch it. This tattoo is mine, a helix of willow catkins to weave spine and scars and brands across my back.

Manaia flicks on a switch, and the world inside her Tattoory is no longer dim. ♦

# DARK ON A DARKLING EARTH

**M**ist turns to jade-white ice that scars and wilts the maple trees. I follow the Stomach of the White Tiger, shimmering overhead in a moonless sky, taking me towards the capital on the sea. I carry a dying solar torch in one hand and the pistol in the other. My joints ache from the cold and I'm ten times the age of this sleek young weapon, my hand shaking as I try to hold it horizontal. It would be better if I knew what the buttons did, but that doesn't really matter. It's not like I'm going to be shooting anybody.

The white sand path is slender, curling its way up into Wu Mountain, a thin pale line in the darkness. I just need to walk this path, then I am home. Just this path and I see my sons and my wife again. My too-young wife with her crooked mouth and crooked hair, and my too-energetic sons and their scraped knees and faces pressed into my skinny thighs. Just this path, and a thousand more like it, five thousand *Li* of winds and mists and cold as the world turns to winter.

That's all.

My numb fingers lose their purchase on the torch and it clatters at my feet, turning itself off in the process. "Ah," I mutter, "your mother!"

I lean forward, preparing to groan mightily as I bend my beleaguered back, when the *snick* of a twig breaking straightens me up. I jump as a large shadow moves onto the path, and accidentally press one of the buttons on the side of the pistol. It makes a spitting sound and sparks fly

## T.R. NAPPER

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER





at the point where the needle strikes the shadow. I jump again at the fact I managed to fire the pistol and drop it as I turn to run. My escape, unfortunately, is short-lived. I step on my robe and trip myself up, sprawling, face bump-and-sliding against the cold hard path.

The shadow stands over me and a voice comes with it, deep and angry: "Silly old son of a bitch." There is a *clack-clack* as preparation for my execution takes place.

I turn onto my back and put my hands over my face. "No! Please don't kill me – please. I am an Omissioner, an Omissioner!" If I were a prouder man, I would be embarrassed by the pleading, the begging in my tone. If I were a prouder man.

A second voice from the shadows, a woman's, lands with the steel rod of authority: "Wait."

The big shadow over me pauses, the stars above glinting on the gun barrel as he lowers it. A torch blares into my eyes and I blink rapidly into the beam. The small circle of light ranges over my body until it alights on the chest of my robes.

"Look," says the woman.

The man's shadow reaches down and grabs the front of my robe roughly, at the insignia. "You're an Omissioner?"

"Yes," I say, for the first time being pleased to admit it. "I was cut off from my—"

"—we can't have this conversation here, we're too exposed," says the woman. "Bring him, Corporal; we'll see what is truth and what is the lie back at camp."

He grabs me, far more roughly than required.

I am pushed and shoved for a dark and cold ten minutes up a steep thin path, the mist returning to press against us. We arrive at a campfire set in a clearing among tall trees, the tops of which I cannot see. I'm thrown down in the arc of flickering orange light. Despite the jarring in my old bones, I am glad of the warmth on this bitter night. I put my hands out to the heat of the fire and glance around the clearing.

There are bedrolls here and a silver dome tent, and I smell the tantalizing smell of cooking rice. Boots scrape behind me and I turn to see the man I shot, the Corporal. He glowers above, cracking his knuckles. His uniform is a faded green, his black armoured vest worn and scratched (with a new scratch courtesy of me) and his jawline looks like standard-issue military – extra-large size. His brow is as low and thick as his voice: "Don't try anything."

A woman with a sergeant's insignia stands next to the Corporal. She removes a dented black helmet to reveal hair as short as the Corporal's. Her mouth looks like it hasn't laughed in a long time and she's as lean as she should be, given the way of this world. Everything about her – her posture, her way of speaking, the way her black boots gleam in the low light – speaks to a woman who suffers no fool.

A third soldier stands nearby. She's much younger – a private by the look of it – with long, ragged dark hair she wears down, an ironic smile, and a pistol she lets ride low on her hip.

I stand, gingerly, and push the mane of grey hair back from my face. "I am Omissioner Du Gongbu, formally of the Thirty-Third," I say, bowing at the Sergeant. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

She doesn't return the bow. "Thirty-Third – are we at war with you?"

I point at the faded army markings on the breast of her armoured vest. "You're from the twelfth special brigade," I say, and then I lie: "We are allies, having fought the battles of Huaihua and Shaoyang together." I have no idea whether we were allies, of course, or whether either army had fought in those battles. But they are all too young here to remember who was meant to be fighting who.

The Sergeant steps over to me, limping slightly, and stands a foot away, eye to eye. Up close she smells of honest sweat and rifle grease. She holds



out her hand. "Let me see your Memento of Office."

Without hesitation I pull at the heavy gold chain around my neck, removing the badge from under my shirt. It glints chrome as I place it in her hand, the symbol of the paradise flycatcher, feet grasping the 智. The state of the world is such that even fools like me are given the mark of wisdom, intelligence and knowledge.

She pauses, mouth a fixed line, while she studies my claim. I've thought about throwing the Memento away a hundred times. My indecision may yet prove beneficial. The magnum-jawed Corporal tries to say something but she holds up a hand, cutting him off. She stares at it for another long half-minute, before the tension eases ever-so-slightly from her shoulders.

She takes a step backwards and bows, deeper than the one I gave her. "Then it is an honour to welcome you, Omissioner. I am Sergeant Hu. This is Corporal Zhong." She points with her chin at the man I shot. His eyes still hold an undisguised desire to snap my old man's neck. "This is Private Xu." The young woman nods at me and sits on a nearby log, resting her forearms on her knees. There's the flash of the devil in her eyes.

"This is our cook and his son, On." A man emerges from the shadows, smiling at me, open and unreserved. He wipes his hands on a dirty white cloth and his son grasps his leg, looking out at me from behind his father's thigh. The son is slim, the cook has the face of a fat man but the same lean body everyone else has here.

"Have you eaten?" asks the Sergeant.

"Pleased to meet you all," I say, with a flourish of my faded red-ragged robe. "Not in three days, Sergeant Hu."

They make concerned noises, even though such a thing is quite common. The cook disappears and soon comes back to place a bowl in my hands. It is a small bowl of rice, some bamboo

shoots and a few drops of fish oil. It's the best meal I've had in months, I bring the chopsticks from bowl to mouth with unseemly haste, still standing, gulping it down in a short minute. My stomach twists when the food hits it, partly with pleasure, partly in shock.

The cook passes me a bucket and scoop when I finish. I hand him the empty bowl and drink deeply of the fresh water, slurping it from the wooden scoop.

There was a time when my hunger would have brought me shame, and shamed others to see one of my rank brought so low. But those days are long gone. The cook simply nods, smiling, and takes the bucket and bowl away when I finish. The rest take their seats around the fire and look at me with that familiar air of expectancy; with that yearning that has followed me across this cold earth ever since I donned the Omissioner's robes.

I sit down on one of the blackened trunks near the fire. "Tell me Sergeant, do you have wine?"

"No," grunts Corporal Zhong.

"We've been saving a bottle we found," says the cook, earning a glare from the Corporal.

"What do you need it for?" asks the Sergeant.

"Wine is a gift from the gods, to warm our hearts and make us speak the truth," I say. Then I lie: "The first rule when meeting an Omissioner is this: give them wine. Do this, and they will speak the truth of your memory, and do so with a warm heart."

"I don't remember that rule about the Omissioner," says Private Xu, eyes twinkling.

"Of course you don't, child. Someone as young as you remembers nothing," I say it stern enough so she blushes and drops her gaze for a moment.

The Sergeant watches me, face like iron, then directs her voice at the cook. "Pour the Omissioner some wine."

The cook disappears into the shadows at the edge of the fire.

"Why did you leave the Thirty-Third?" asks the Sergeant.

I lie: "We were ambushed by the Fifty-Eighth, in a pass down near Qingshen. They fired the camp, saying we brought contaminated food and bodies from the cities."

"A purist line?" questions the Sergeant. "I thought the south was dominated by eco-revisionists."

"Don't you mean eco-rightists?" someone asks.

The Private pulls her memory card from her pocket – a translucent golden square glowing with its own internal luminescence – her face softly lit in its deep yellow backwash. "No – the opposition in the south are holders of the Liu-Deng line, in league with the American eco-reactionaries."

While they argue over imaginary foes, the cook gives me a bamboo cup half-filled with wine. I nod and smile up at him, hiding my frustration at the miserly portion.

"Americans?" someone says, "There's no Americans left. There's not even an America anymore."

"What role do the Rixin-Kong line holders have in all of this?" asks Corporal Zhong.

"Who are they?" asks Private Xu.

"I met them on the road when I was travelling to join the Thirty-Third," he says, looking at the Sergeant, even though the Private had asked the question. "They said they were comrades of ours, collecting funds for the war effort. One of them showed me a memory card listing us as allies. I helped them out as much as I could."

The Sergeant shrugs: "I've never heard of them," and looks at me. "Omissioner?"

I looked up from the dregs at the bottom of my cup. "Rixin-Kong? Never heard of it."

"But you're the Omissioner," says the Private, with ironic politeness that apparently only I hear.

"I know." I look over at Corporal Zhong. "Tell me, what did the Rixin-Kong look like?"

He squints into the fire. "I just remember that name. I wrote it down after." He takes out his memory card, tapping his finger on the glowing golden square, looking for the entry. "I've written here they were a ragged group of soldiers, close to starvation. Only one had a gun. Six men and a woman, the woman was the one that spoke to me. She wore an armoured vest, dark blue with a silver dragon."

"They weren't Rixin-Kong line holders."

"No?" he rumbles, "What were they then?"

"Bandits."

He lowers the memory card slowly.

"There are no Rixin-Kong revolutionaries. By your description it sounds like deserters from the Guangxi campaign – the Third Flying Squadron – convinced you they were on your side. Such occurrences are common these days. They carry around memory cards that show them as allies with just about everyone." I could have left it there. But my hip still hurt from where he had flung me onto the ground, and my wine cup was empty. "Being gullible is one thing. But gullible in a world without memory is fatal."

The Corporal stands, a deep rumbling coming from somewhere in his chest. I smile up at him; now they've confirmed me as an Omissioner he can't lay a hand on me.

"Enough," says the Sergeant, her voice as flat and smooth as a pond of ice. Just one word is all she needs and the Corporal sits, and the smile is gone from my face. "You've had your wine," she continues, indicating my cup with her chin. "Now earn your keep. Tell us our stories and our history; tell us who we are."

I nod my head at her in an outward display of complete agreement. Inwardly I wonder how many bottles of this wine the cook has secreted away. "What would you like to hear?"

"Tell us of great events. As Omissioner, you would have dined with generals, with the poets who weave the common memories of our



nation, with the princes and princesses who seek to bring unity."

I lie, partially: "Yes."

"Then tell us of the great men and women who lead this campaign. Tell us of what this war means to them," the Sergeant asks. There is something in her eye as she asks it, but I don't quite catch its meaning.

I look into the fire. I tell the truth: "The generals complain all day long and watch plays at night, they eat three full meals a day and fart, then go to sleep in warm beds. That's what the war means to them."

I expect a rebuke from the Sergeant, but instead she almost smiles – or smiles as much as a person who never smiled could – and says, "Tell us then of this place." She indicates the darkness around us with her eyes.

"This is Wu Mountain," I say, and she nods in reply. She pulls her gold-shimmering memory card from her pocket so she can record the key facts; they all do, except the Corporal. It is Wu Mountain, this is true. As always, the rest I say is a lie:

*"Here is where the Xia Emperor, dressed in his dragon robe and carrying a great golden axe, swept past with his mouth filled with fire, scattering the deviationist tribes of Chiang Kai-Shek."*

*"But I'm not going to tell you that story."*

*"Here is Wu Mountain, where the stone monster, whose scales move with the autumn winds, and whose feet are larger than elephants, stopped to rest on his journey east. The monster that was lured to the caves with promises of warmth and protection by the treacherous Gang of Four and their leader, the beautiful witch Jiang Qing, who drugged the tea she gave to the monster when it sat down at her table."*

Private Xu narrows her dark, gleaming eyes at me when I say this. The rest look on in wonder, as all do when an Omissioner gives the gift of truth.

*"But I'm not going to tell you of this."*

*"I'm going to tell you of Lao Zi, who tried to walk against the lines of the earth, who attempted the journey west from Wu Mountain, through the purple mists of the pass."*

I speak low enough so they have to lean forward.

*"Lao Zi, the great warrior of the fourth epoch, carried the silver crossbow of the Jiayu Pass. Lao Zi was the assassin who shot a silver bolt ten miles to strike the heart of the foul dictator Joao Ferreira the Black. Lao Zi was the master tactician who played Go against the Mongol General for two years, deliberately prolonging the game until the Mongol's superior army deserted and his campaign against Lao Zi's homelands collapsed."*

*"Lao Zi walked here in the shadow of Wu Mountain. Then, as now, swallows that should have migrated swooped around his head, frightened and confused. It was here that he came across a grey turtle, old and weeping, making its way slowly east."*

*"Lao Zi stopped and said: 'What is wrong, old man?' The turtle replied: 'Lao Zi, do not head west. All roads there now lead to the city of Chang-an; all passes and all ways must run through it. That city is now a city of ghosts. The ghosts play the same games they've played for a hundred years. They play them over and again, living out the dreams of others, remembering the memories of others: lives and memories that they swap each and every day. But you will never live to see that bleak place, Lao Zi. The trail between here and there is long and harsh and even such as you, with all your talents, will perish.'*

*"Lao Zi placed his hands on his silver crossbow, and said: 'You know my name by my reputation; as do all in this land. But you don't know me, old man.'*

*"The turtle sighed and said: 'The gibbons will tell you three times the truth, and three times you will know it. But arrogant in your easy competence, you will ignore them.'*

*"Angry, Lao Zi said: 'Arrogance? It is you who are arrogant to speak to me like this, old man. Why take your word and not another? There are a thousand fools between here and Chang'an, only a fool would pay heed to even one.'*

*"The grey turtle replied: 'I know Lao Zi, because I am you. I am you, living in the sixth epoch, a thousand years from now. If I speak with arrogance, it is what pride still lingers from the folly of your youth. If I seem mournful, it is the knowledge of what that arrogance cost me. Turn back now or you will be forced to walk the road east for all eternity, a million Li on turtle's feet, doomed to repeat and repeat again. Turn back, Lao Zi, for my sake, for yours.'*

*"Lao Zi ignored the turtle, leaving without a word. He walked until he stood near a deep gorge. In this place the gibbons bounced and watched him from the trees and called to him. And he found it was true, the things they said, and he wept. Three times they called to him, yet three times he failed to heed them, the only fool on the path to Chang'an.*

*"He walked to the West, until the purple mist crossed the pass. Lao Zi was consumed by it, as was foretold. When you look West, friends, think of him. And know that if the turtle is slow, it is because he knows he will never arrive at his destination."*

They were silent after that, their faces flickering orange from the fire, all turned to me.

"West?" asks the Corporal, looking over at the Sergeant.

The Sergeant still looks at me. "We were heading West, Omissioner. Are you saying it is a mistake? Are the purple mists...are they real?"

I give her an ambiguous raised eyebrow, the sort that suggests I know all the answers, but I was, in my wisdom, encouraging them to work it out for themselves. I was quite pleased with myself after the story. Except for the turtle-from-the-future part, which I often used in these tales,

I'd made everything up on the spot. That's the thing about stories that are lyrical and vague, filled with familiar symbols and primal dreams: anyone can read anything into them. So I spin my tales while the listener weaves their own truth to each one. They let me have my wine and I let them have their fictions. This is the circularity of the dead world I now walk through, and it is enough for me.

Almost enough, anyway.

"The west was a long shot," grunts the cook.

The Corporal squares his shoulders. "Where the Sergeant says we go, we go."

"The cook is right. West was always a long shot," says the Sergeant, and the mumbling from the others ceases. It is hard to tell in the firelight, but her eyes seem to gleam.

The Private has been watching me throughout. "What the Omissioner's story tells us is this," she says, "the journey east is too long. If we head that way we live as the turtle does, on a journey that never ends."

"Um," I say, "I'm not sure—"

"South – it means we must go south," continues the Private, "like I keep saying. We can't survive the creeping winter. We must head towards a warmer climate."

I want to interrupt and tell her she's wrong, but it's too late. The conversation heads where I don't want it to go and in so doing, veers away from my home. The Private looks at me while the others speak, eyes twinkling. I was right; she has the devils in her. I grit my teeth. I should just have had the turtle tell them to go east: kept it simple. But no, I tried to end the story with a flourish. Old fool. So they speak of their new plans with each other over the fire while I look into my empty wine cup. I am attached to these people now – to leave this remnant unit would be called desertion. And the iron-faced Sergeant woman was the sort to shoot deserters.

My wife and sons never felt further away.



I am awoken the next morning, the large face of the cook smiling over me as he shakes my shoulder. I grumble at him for doing so, groan at the cold in my bones, and curse both as I sit myself up. He puts a warm cup of tea in one hand and rice porridge in the other, and leaves me to my grumbling, still smiling. The mists have not relented with the early morning, they press in on the small clearing, drawing a veil across the darkened forest beyond. The others have already packed their bags and are chatting to each other quietly.

The warm breakfast is a pleasure I have not had for many weeks, and I relish it. When I give the bowl back to the cook, his face reddens as he opens his mouth and then closes it again.

"Is there something you want to ask me, cook?"

"This dish," he holds up the bowl, "what's the name of it again?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Congee?"

He beams and bows deeply. "Yes, that's it – congee. Thank you Omissioner."

The cook seems worse than average. Maybe that's why they just call him cook. He's probably forgotten his own name.

We walk most of the morning and afternoon, with a brief break for lunch. I slow them down, but not too much. In this world you can either march all day, or you can die, and I've been marching as long as I can remember. I still complain, of course. I am old, so it is my right. About the cold, my sore hip, the lack of wine. The others pay due respect to my office by not telling me to be silent; Corporal Zhong just glowers twenty shades of loathing at me. The mist is always with us, whether thirty feet away or three, pressing down on the earth and our moods. Eventually its oppressive omnipresence is enough to stop even my old-man complaints, and we are left with silence bar the scuffing of feet and a thin wind that rattles the bamboo.

We are setting up camp in the dark trees that evening when the Sergeant emerges from the mist, red-faced from running. "Omissioner," she puffs, "I've found something. You need to see this."

I'm already sitting down near the fire and not planning on leaving it anytime soon. "What is it?"

Her eyes harden. "Now."

The Corporal stands. "You heard the Sergeant – now."

The orders in stereo only harden my desire to stay where I am, but I've decided the Sergeant scares me. So I grumble and complain, but get to my feet anyway. After a twisting walk down a fading stone path we come to a large, grey door covered in moss and moisture. Water has worn down the markings on the stone, but despite its age, despite the decay, the symbol engraved on the door is plain to see. It matches the symbol on my Memento of Office – the 智.

"This is something important, isn't it?" asks the Sergeant. The others have gathered behind her now, curious. Even the cook is here, his son staring up at the huge door from behind his father's apron.

I rake back the grey hair from my eyes and step over to a short stone pillar that stands next to the door. My heart thumps in my chest and suddenly my throat is dry. This can't be what I think it is. Not after all this time. The top of the pillar is angled at forty-five degrees towards me, made of a dark metal that time has made little impact on. It is completely blank, just a flat, black panel with enough shine still in it that I can see my reflection: an old man with deceptively quiet eyes and a thin white beard growing from his chin.

I pull the Memento from my shirt and pass it over the touchplate. Nothing happens.

For several long seconds, anyway, while the others look on in silence. Then something does

happen, the touchplate glows a soft golden hue and satisfying *clunk-clunks*, metallic and deep, echo from inside the door. With a hiss of compressed air and a gasp from someone behind me, it opens.

I move to enter, but the Sergeant pushes me to one side, signalling Zhong and Xu to go first. Zhong leads, machine gun to his shoulder, while the Private pulls the pistol from her hip and shadows him down steep stone stairs. We follow. The stairs end at another door, this one clean-steel and chrome. My Memento opens this door as the last, and we follow Zhong and Xu through.

We enter another world.

The space is brightly lit, a smooth oval space with moulded furniture in harsh whites and soft reds, the walls lined with books and viewing screens and paintings of worlds long forgotten. The lines are crisp here, real, when I reach out and touch a cushion the sensation of the soft leather against my fingertips is sensual and startling. The space is large and interspersed among the moulded chairs are plinths, perhaps twenty, an object on each. One near me has old coins with square holes in the middle, the next, a calligraphy pen and scroll with ancient script; the one after that a bronze cauldron with intricate patterning on the side – western Zhou period, I'm sure; lacquered black wood platform shoes on another, a horn shaped jade cup on the next, pure and curled and gleaming.

It's like waking up from a long dream. Senses long blurred are now sharp, vague thoughts now linear and clear.

"What is this, Omissioner?" asks the Sergeant, now at my shoulder. She speaks in the whisper of her awe.

I tell the truth, readily: "A memory shelter. I heard of these, secreted away as minds faded and wars began. I thought it a myth, passed from general to general, Omissioner to Omissioner." I nod towards the shelves and the screens. "Here

is our collective consciousness, the fibres of our civilization. These books and manuscripts and artefacts embody us, and in those screens there on the walls you'll find a hundred million recordings and facts and virtual archaeologies."

Her hand touches my elbow, her fingertips sparking as they alight on the cloth of my robe. I start and turn to her. She bows deeply. The Corporal and the cook and even his son do the same. The passivity of shock and wonder now settled on their faces.

The Sergeant's eyes are wide, glistening. "You have saved us, Omissioner. We owe you our lives." She turns and indicates walls. "And you have given us purpose. To protect this, to learn it, to preserve it will be the duty of our lifetimes. And yours will be to teach it all."

I'm wondering how to respond to this rather lengthy proposed timeframe when the Private appears at the mouth of one of three corridors that lead from the room. "Omissioner – you must see this."

Thankful of the excuse to end the conversation with the Sergeant, I follow Private Xu down the short white corridor. I stop when we enter the next room. Then I fall to my knees, and clasp my hands together. Then tears roll from my eyes.

As far as my eyes can see, bottles of wine set behind glass in white-glowing cabinets. Fine Chinese reds from Xinjiang and Ningxia, and there, bold Sicilian vintages and fine French Bordeaux, and a little further along, rows of crisp Australian whites and complex, alluring New Zealand Pinot Gris. And more. So much more. A lifetime of more.

The Private stands next to me, hands on hips. Her voice is filled with her ironic smile. "I guess I'd weep too, if I found my personal nirvana."

I nod, feigning agreement, as tears trickle down my face. I weep not because I have found it: I weep because I have to leave it behind.



I spend the afternoon drinking a fine Ningxia cabernet and reading a slim volume of ancient poetry. I am content.

As the evening arrives, the Sergeant tells me they have found a store of food that will last for years, and the cook is preparing an extravagant meal to celebrate our first evening in the memory shelter. The Sergeant and I seat ourselves at a large white table we have decided is for communal meals. Soon Private Xu saunters in, cigarette dangling from her mouth, and Corporal Zhong follows, sitting down with a large can of Laotian beer in his hand. A peace has settled on the small unit now – contentment even.

The Sergeant says: “Tell us another memory of Wu Mountain.”

I don’t have the energy to lie after the long walk and the excitement, so I tell the truth: “I won’t talk about Wu Mountain tonight. Tonight I will honour the discovery of the memory shelter with a poem by our greatest poet, Du Fu. If there’s one poet you need to remember, it is him.” They all reach for their memory cards.

I breathe in deeply. “This is a poem for those who have left for war, and those who wait for them at home.”

In a quiet, clear voice, I remember every line to them:

*“I have this feeling  
You won’t come back from frontier duties*

*But autumn is here  
And I get out the laundry stone*

*Soon you’ll feel the cold  
The way I feel our separation*

*I clean your winter clothes  
Whether I want to or not*

*Send them off to where you’re stationed*

### *Near the Great Wall*

*A woman uses all her strength  
Beating the laundry with a club*

*Maybe if you listen hard  
You’ll hear it way out there.”*

They remain silent after I finish. Unmoving, watching me but not watching, eyes distant.

The Private sits with her finger poised over her gold-glowing card. “I can’t write what that is. I can’t describe that.”

I smile. “I know.” Then I lie: “Don’t worry, I’ll tell it again in a week.”

We eat a fine meal of Dongpo pork, soy eggs, pickled vegetables, Baozi, wontons, and hot and sour soup. There is wine and – for the first time since I join them – there is laughter. The cook sits and eats with us and his son, a smear of chocolate above his eyebrow, watches me with eyes wide as I speak. I am sated by the meal and made expansive by the wine, I tell them truth and lies about the war and where I’ve been and what I’ve seen, and they hang on every word.

But the day has been long and taken its toll. They drift away to bed – comfortable, warm bunks for more than fifty have been found down one of the corridors – and soon all that remains is me and the Private, she with a packet of Double Happiness brand cigarettes, me with an Australian Pinot Noir. Such a shame, what happened to Australia – they really did make such magnificent wine.

I watch her in silence. She watches me. I drink my wine, she lights a cigarette and burns through it.

Finally she says: “Why do you want to go east, Omissioner?”

“Why do you wish to stop me?”

She shrugs. “Habit. I don’t like being told what to do.” She lights another cigarette, touching

the tip of the last to the fresh one. "Plus I think you're lying. I think everything that comes out of your mouth is a lie."

I eye her uniform. "If you don't like taking orders, why did you join the army?"

She blows a cloud of smoke upwards. "How the fuck should I know?"

It's a good question. I sigh.

Maybe it's the wine, maybe it's the hope that there are some good devils in her, maybe it's the fact I have no allies and I'm desperate. But whatever it is, I do something foolish, I tell the truth: "My wife and two sons are there."

Xu leans forward, slender forearms on the edge of the table, cigarette trailing a slow line of smoke to the ceiling. "And the Sergeant would never let you go there for that reason."

I raise my eyebrows in the sign for 'obviously', refill the wine in my glass, and pour a fresh one for her.

"It's worse than you think, Omissioner."

I'm unhappy, and don't manage to keep it out of my voice. "Why is that, Private?"

She frowns. "If we're going to drink together, we can drop the formalities. My name is Xiaofan."

I pass her the cup, then indicate for her to continue.

She leans back in her chair, sipping her wine on the way back. "I returned from guard duty one night, close to dawn. Freezing, barely able to see two feet away with the mist. This is maybe a month ago. Maybe a year, I'm not sure. Anyway, when I got back to camp I saw Sergeant Hu looking at her memory card. Everyone else was asleep, and she was crying. I was shocked. She's like a bronze statue, our Sergeant. I was with her once when she was shot four times in the legs, lying in the mud in her blood and filth. I start panicking and she says to me calmly 'pass me a med-kit Private, and then return fire on that position.' No pain on her face, no anger – like she was asking me to pass her the soya sauce."

We both smile at this.

She continues: "But there she was, crying. She'd put the card on the ground next to her and buried her face in her hands. I snuck around behind her. I shouldn't have done it. But we walk through this world like zombies, not knowing where we're going, or what we're feeling, or why we're feeling it. Dead inside or trying to be dead inside. So if someone feels something, especially the Sergeant, well I want to know why. So I looked at the card. It said one thing: 'father is east'. That's all."

After a long pause, she continues: "Hu was leading us east, into the depths of an entire continent, based on one line in a memory card. I respected her after that Omissioner, more than that, I—" She breaks off her voice and her gaze, unwilling to finish the thought.

We sit in silence after that, mutually agreed. I finish the bottle then start another, watching the cloud of smoke circle the girl's head.

Xiaofan says something.

"What?"

"I said I'm sorry." There's no ironic smile in her voice.

I shrug and sip my wine. "Like the Sergeant said: it was a long shot, Xiaofan."

She nods, and the regret in her eyes is real.

It's a long shot, but I don't care. I'm still going back to my family. And now I have an ally.

**I** saw something on patrol earlier. Let me show you."

The Private stands near me, hands on hips. She has a way of leaning one hip to the side and resting the palm of her hand on the curve that an old man like me finds quite distracting. I'm sipping a blunt but satisfying Chilean red and reading poetry again.

I keep my eyes away from her hips. "Is it worth it?"

"It's worth it."



I sigh. "Let me bring my bag."

Thirty minutes later we are sitting on flat, almost-dry stones at the top of a steep ridge. The mist is less pervasive today, affording us the view of a serene, dark watered lake, the edges of which are firm with white ice. In the distance the dark, jutting shapes of hills, fingers of hills, pushing themselves up into the mist or the clouds or whatever lies above us. The silence here is perfect, and draws me in.

Xiaofan snaps her lighter shut, drawing my attention to her. She drags long on the cigarette, looking at me out of the corner of her eye. "Better pour the wine then, old turtle."

I wince at the name she gives me, but she is young and doesn't know its colloquial meaning. I draw two bamboo cups and a bottle of wine from my travel bag, filling us each a cup.

She drinks deep on the wine. When she speaks, her voice is far away.

"This mist follows me everywhere. Not just out here, but in my mind as well. I can't think straight, I can't feel straight, I can't grasp anything with my thoughts. Sometimes I think this is all a dream. I worry that if I don't wake up soon I will become this dream and my reality will fade away." She looks at me. "Am I going crazy?"

I shake my head and then tell the truth: "This is a dream, dreamed by our country. It sleeps deeply now, and we are fated to walk through its slumber. Through its half-remembered places, through the longings of its history, through the world it abandoned to despair."

She sighs with frustration. "Oh Du."

"What?"

"Don't ever switch careers to counsellor."

"Were you seeking reassurance?"

"No. No, I guess not. Maybe just not the one person in this world more melancholy than I."

I smile a sad smile. "Drink your wine," I say, "so we can have another."

We're finishing our first bottle when she says:

"You didn't ask about what I was going to show you."

"I assumed you'd get around to it."

She nods down the slope. "Look – down there, at the edge of the lake."

I follow her gaze, past the dark, frost-scarred trees and thin tendrils of mist. There, there it is. A boat, small and silver, tied to a stump at the edge of the lake.

I nod, slowly. My salvation: a small, lone boat, tied up.

My eyes are still on the boat as I speak. "How dear are memories, Xiaofan? It's like asking someone how important is the heart beating in their chest. I don't just hold the memories of others; I hold their identities, their sense of self and place and time. They, in turn, hold to me as tightly as if I were part of their soul. You'd think in a world without a past, the man with memory would be king. But no, in that world, he who remembers is a slave."

"Have you run away from many groups like ours?" she asks, quietly.

"Three."

She sips her wine, her bottom lip glistening as she takes the cup away from her mouth. "Zhong will kill you, if you try to escape. He's that way inclined."

"I know." I drink deeply, watching the mist that rolls over the waters.

We're silent for a while until I bump her with my shoulder. "Unless he has sex: that will temper his temper."

"It's not going to happen."

"No?" I raise an eyebrow. "He is the last man on earth for you, and for the Sergeant."

"Man? No. She's not that way inclined."

It takes me a few seconds. "Oh."

She blows out a cloud of smoke and cold-misted breath. "Yes: 'oh.'"

"And I take it you're not that way inclined towards the Sergeant?"

"No."

I shake my head. "A perfect circle of instability."

I reach for the bottle and fill my glass. Xiaofan lets me fill hers as well. This makes me happy. I am a man used to drinking alone, but it is heartening to find a kindred spirit, even for just one evening. All souls need communion, even the old and bitter ones. Those, most of all.

I sigh with contentment. The evening comes and the cold of the stone is starting to freeze the bones in my arse, but the wine and company warms my chest. "And you're not interested in Zhong either, I take it."

She rolls her eyes. "You'd have a better chance, Du Gongbu."

I smile, feeling the warmth now in my cheeks, as well. I'm an old man, but still, old men have egos too.

"Even if I was," she continues, "I'm married."

"So you're trying to get home as well?"

"No."

"No?"

Her eyes shine. "I—" The muscles in her jaw tighten and she sighs through her nose, closing her eyes. Like something unwanted has passed over her vision.

I understand her reaction. It's one I've seen a hundred times. "You don't remember where home is."

She shakes her head, jaw still tight. Afraid perhaps speaking will cause the emotion to flow out. Her lips quiver, cyanotic with the cold.

I reach out – with some hesitancy – and put my hand on her shoulder. I whisper: "Do you remember him?"

She shakes her head, clears her throat. When she speaks, her voice is thick: "I lost my memory card. I only found a replacement for it a few months ago. All I have now are snatches of images of him: standing in the kitchen, bamboo steamer in his hand, or next to me in bed, asleep. I have this one memory of him, casually walking

around the lounge room whistling this silly tune, while I lie on the sofa reading. Suddenly he pretends to trip over and he falls on me, making me lose the page I am on, kissing me all over my face. I remember him doing that a few times, actually."

We both smile at that.

But hers disappears quickly. "But I don't—" A tear escapes, finally, rolling down her cheek. She wipes it away angrily. "I don't even remember his fucking name."

She covers her face.

I leave my hand on her back while she sobs quietly. Overhead, stars shine bright in a clear night sky, the mist above us gone. I imagine I hear the Milky Way as it flows, and watch the Jade String inch across the sky while this girl weeps tears over a man she can't remember. There's a tightness in my chest, and I scowl at myself. I'm too old for such sentimentality.

After a time, she stops sobbing and then, after a few minutes, says with a thick voice: "Is this all there is, Omissioner?"

I pause. "Yes. This is all. Eternity is one gigantic corpse. We take our turns weeping and grieving, while great men do great things."

She lets that ride for a few seconds and then laughs, with humour and bitterness. "Wow. Thanks for cheering me up."

I rub her back and smile back at her. "There's only one medicine I can recommend." I pull a fresh bottle from my satchel. She looks up at me, eyes red, and I hold the bottle out to her, my eyebrows raised in a question mark.

"Ha," she says, pushing her hair back from her red eyes. "I think for once you've got the occasion right. Pour me some damn wine."

So we drink it all and tell each other stories as the bitter winds of the night blow down from Wu Mountain. We huddle close, letting wine and company and nostalgia warm us. She tells me splinters of what she can remember of her



old life, and I tell her the parts of mine that hurt a little, but not too much, in the telling.

Too soon the mists come heavy again and the wine is gone and all we can do is walk back to the camp, and sing. It is a patriotic tune, I think, and I get more excited than an old man should and fall and hit my head. Xiaofan puts my arm over her shoulder and helps me back, while I mumble and slur and try to tell her the time I defeated the jade dragon with my wits.

She laughs. "If you told me your enemy was a jade bottle of wine I might believe you."

The next day, after my hangover abates enough, I make my agreement with Xiaofan. I make a promise to her, and it is no lie.

In the weeks that follow I teach her and the others how to use the equipment in the shelter, how to record memories and how to access them. Xiaofan enters all her memories of her husband, while she still can. The cook's boy sits on my knee while I show him how to use the programs on the screen that will, in turn, teach him to read and write. I explain to all the history of the artefacts and show the cook which wines he may use for cooking, making sure he writes it all down on his memory card.

After one month, my end of the deal is done, and I ask Xiaofan to fulfil hers.

She does. She helps me escape.

Just before dusk, during her watch, she hugs me fiercely. "Stay safe, old turtle," she says. Then she lets me leave.

The boat starts when I press the ignition button, sputtering itself into existence. I had one, brief chance to test the engine two weeks earlier. It started straight away then, as well. I smile, despite myself.

Then the engine stops, and so does my smile. I press the button again, jabbing it until my finger hurts. Nothing happens. I check the power pack:

it is dead. The solar collectors must no longer function. This boat, like this world, is an illusion.

I sit in the gunwale of the boat, feet sodden, my fight as dead as the battery. The wind picks up my old white hair, holding it vertical in the breeze, like the crest of a wild crane. My hands rest on my thighs, palms open, as though in supplication.

My wife and my two sons, they are this ache in my chest. My too-young wife with her crooked smile, touching my shoulder as I sit writing my poems, and my too-energetic sons, waiting to throw the ball with me. They are this numbness where my soul should be. I weep the bitter tears of defeat and pray this plague of forgetting blesses me again and again, removes them from my mind. That my mind fades as this day closes: in a purple dusk, beautiful in its remnants, then gone forever.

My wife and sons are lost. An old turtle like me can't make a journey of five thousand *Li*, even if I could get this boat working. A hundred more rivers like this and a thousand more paths besides, they are too far, for this old man. My heart, I think, has always known it. My choices now are death, or to endure.

It's a shame I'm too stubborn and selfish for death.

The clouds run close to the ground now, dark on a darkling earth. I sit here, unable to feel my feet, and watch the memory of the world pass away. I smile and think: at least, at the end, there will be wine.

---

T.R. Napper is an aid worker, stay-at-home father, and writer. He is a Writers of the Future winner and his non-fiction has been widely published. 'Dark on a Darkling Earth' was inspired by the life and poetry of the great Du Fu. The translation of one of his poems in this story is by David Young, and has been reproduced with Mr Young's permission. T.R. Napper currently lives in Ha Noi, Vietnam. His website can be found at [www.nappertime.com](http://www.nappertime.com), and he can be found here on twitter: @DarklingEarth.

## THE FACES BETWEEN US

Drive long enough and you can find anything. Copper-eyed goddesses. Gilded August afternoons. That arid stretch of Oregonian high desert in the southeastern corner of the state. Keep driving and you might catch something even more precious – a path through. Perhaps even a fairy tale ending. That's what Amber promised me during that long ago summer.

Didn't matter. Back then the girl could have said almost anything and I wouldn't have listened.

Each Saturday morning I drove while Amber sat beside me, watching the miles slide by. Unwanted photographs and half-finished journals, scratched and dusty vinyl, Amber knew exactly what she wanted. Bessie Smith's 'Baby





## JULIE C. DAY

Won't You Please Come Home' or, better yet, early Helen Hume and Anita O'Day before the heroin slide. "Oregon's true spirit" was Amber's term for all that transformed darkness. As though I had the slightest idea what she meant.

That particular Saturday morning, Amber was already waiting on the front step when I pulled up in my truck. She stood pressed against the handrail, as far from her mother as physically possible. Amber's mom sat hunched in the sunshine, picking at the scabs that ran along her too-thin arms.

It was just Amber and Mrs Destros. Amber's dad, Mr Destros, had disappeared months ago, just before Amber and I had started going out. "Didn't



even bother to show me the way” was all Amber’s mom would say on the subject. Somehow, I had the sense Amber knew exactly where her dad had landed.

“Hey, babe,” I called from the open passenger window. Amber bolted down the stairs and across the weed-strewn yard while Amber’s mom stopped picking at her scabs long enough to grab a nearby metal can opener.

“Let’s go,” Amber said as she opened the passenger door. “You’re fucking late,” she added.

“Sunstone?” Amber’s mom had started waving the can opener in our direction. “Sunstone? I’m only trying to help. No one else gives a shit if you ever find the way. Not like me. Not like Dad pretended to.”

“Brilliant parenting, Mom,” Amber said through the open passenger window. “Stellar, in fact. I said let’s go,” she repeated, turning in my direction.

“You look hot, you know? Combustible,” I clarified as I put the truck into drive. And she really did. Back then Amber smoldered with some strange amalgam of rage and pain: flushed skin, scorched honey-dust eyes – and those breasts.

Amber glared at me. “What the hell are you smiling at?”

“Nice try, but I’m not even close to angry,” I said, steering the Ford away from the curb and her mom’s strange obsession. Hopefully, the gas would last.

Amber’s house was littered with can openers: easy-grip double-wheels, standard butterflies, and those old-fashioned church keys that you punch down against the can. “The same old parent shit – just with spirits and crumbly bits,” Amber told me the one time I bothered to ask.

“What?”

“They like to snort it. Or she does, I guess. Dad did too, before he cut out.”

“Snort what? Tuna fish and cling peaches?” I ignored the dig about her missing dad.

“All sorts of stuff. Basically whatever might push them through.”

“Huh.” After that I left the topic well enough alone. Asking Amber too many questions was exactly the wrong sort of hassle. Like why she called me her “little catalyst”. Like why her mom kept talking about “Oregon’s Golden Realm”.

“So where the fuck were you?” Amber leaned forward and turned on the radio. “I’ve been waiting for almost half an hour out there with *her* and her kitchen utensils.”

“Still not angry.” I rolled down my window and turned onto Highway 206 and the empty miles between central Oregon’s fade-away towns. “You get as mad as you want. Doesn’t matter to me. ‘No feelings’ Larry, right? I’m your ‘no demands,’ ‘no expectations’ guy.”

Amber laughed, flecks of smoke-tinged gold shining from her eyes. “God, I really love you.”

“I’m glad,” I said, refusing to parrot back her words. Girls and their feelings were dangerous – this girl anyway, busily tracing her secret path.

Home for both of us was on the wrong side of the Cascade Mountains. Our stretch of Oregon was full of barely-there towns, faded aluminum siding, and old men in lawn chairs, waiting for the reappearance of something even they suspected would never return.

According to Amber, towns like Wasco weren’t just small-town Oregon. They were entry points into the true Oregon, Oregon’s spirit realm.

Maybe, and maybe not, but back then I could drive my truck forever if it meant I’d get laid.

“Amber?” I tried, slipping one hand between her thighs.

“Shh, Larry, I’m concentrating.” Amber swatted me away. The wind came through the open windows, whipping her dark hair into a shroud that covered her eyes and mouth.

“Come on, babe,” I said. “Sing me one of your old-timey songs.”

That got her attention.

Some days, Amber was just a girl with faded bruises and stories she didn’t share. Other days she sang. Those hot-and-crumbly ghosts, she claimed, required her music before they’d reveal the path’s next turn.

God, Amber could sing. Billie Holiday and Etta James took me that way, but Amber was the real thing: an “old soul” carrier, all ashy with second-hand shame.

It took two songs and thirty minutes to flush out our prey.

“This is it,” Amber said, pointing to a trailer home set in a patch of hemlock and pine. There



were no other people in sight, just a woman with stiff, salt-and-pepper hair and a rough slash of lipstick.

"Hey," I said as I stepped down from the cab. The old lady nodded but remained silent. The two of us watched Amber pick through the tables of stuff: a box of Nancy Drew novels covered in tattered dust jackets, a crockpot with a brittle-looking cord, a broken wicker basket filled with buttons.

"Larry." Amber held up a dented metal cylinder about ten inches tall. Inside, I could see red-and-white drinking straws.

"You sure?"

"Definitely."

"Eighteen dollars." The old lady frowned, daring either of us to argue.

"Give the lady her money, Larry," Amber said with a grin.

"Okay," I said, pretending to reach for my wallet.

Then we were both sprinting for the truck, Amber still wrestling with the cab door as I pulled away – fast.

That's what I remember about that Saturday in August: red-and-white straws and the two of us laughing as we traveled west along Highway 206. Blue skies all the way.

.....  
Forget souls or emotional vibrations; truth is ghosts are closer to ambered flies trapped in their own past. How much do they even notice the needs of the living? That's the question neither of us thought to ask. Amber assumed the ghosts were trying to help, and perhaps they were, but there are only so many ways to use those red-and-white drinking straws.

No more Saturday morning drives. No more flushed cheeks while my hands slid down Amber's naked belly. Those first few weeks of August were all the same: me standing in the gloom of Amber's basement, waiting impatiently as she worked on her homemade pixie sticks.

A single light bulb hung overhead. A can opener rested on the edge of the table, ignored, at least for now. Amber had never explained its presence. She didn't need to. Even then I knew it was Amber's metaphorical cyanide pill, her option of last resort.

"Get this right and it'll be even better than my 'old-timey' songs," Amber promised yet again. Her voice sounded grim. There were dark circles under her eyes and a tightness to her lips. The pink streaks in her dark hair, though, still made me think of melt-in-your-mouth spun sugar.

"Maybe the old lady's straws weren't the key after all."

Amber grunted but otherwise ignored my comment.

I'd been sampling Amber's pixie sticks every night for the last week. No snorting; that was one of Amber's few rules. We swallowed it all down: the powdered nutmeg and straight-up sugar, the pulverized shrooms and crushed Necco Wafers, we even cooked up a homemade extract of weed, plastic-bottle vodka, and honey.

Kids' stuff. The two of us searching for that path through to our fairy tale ending.

I shifted restlessly, watching from a spot just behind Amber's chair as she taped shut the end of yet another straw, added the Ritalin I'd scored, and then poured in my favorite version of her sugar chasers: Sour Patch Kid remnants she'd saved from a grocery store candy-run the week before.

"The kick at the end" was my name for that sweet, acidic tingle. A taste like cotton-candy rage coating the back of my throat as we fucked.

I reached out and touched the nape of Amber's neck, frowning as her shoulders stiffened. This basement stuff was getting old.

"Just five more minutes," Amber muttered.

"Right." I turned away from Amber and her latest soon-to-fail experiment, kicking a can opener left at the bottom of the basement stairs. It made a satisfying clatter as it skidded across the floor. My sneakers scuffed out my progress as I followed the can opener toward the dimness of the far wall.

"No going back there. You promised, Larry," Amber said, still not looking at me.

"Okay," I said. But I didn't stop. Amber's game was going nowhere. It was my turn at spirit guide.

I pulled the cord of a nearby light and leaned in for a closer look. All I could see were metal shelves set across the length of the cinder block wall. Each shelf was filled with rows of dusty cans the size and shape of canned tomatoes but

copper-colored with thick, lead seams. Some of the cans had mineral bleeds of blue and turquoise. A few still had partial labels, more than half worn off.

I grabbed a can. Already its coppery weight felt so much better than any candy-coated pixie stick. On the ragged bit of label, I could make out the word 'Hospital' in bold, black letters. And higher up, typed in fainter print, was a name. 'Maisel'.

"Amber, check this out."

"You fucking promised." For once Amber was looking straight at me.

"Explain why again," I said, striding back with the 'Maisel' can in my hand.

"Dad left them here. When they closed the hospital, they didn't even bury their ghosts. Just left behind all that ash. He was the only one who cared. Well – knew how to use them," she amended.

The light bulb above Amber drew strange shadows across her face. Still, there was something funny about her expression. Sadness maybe? Anger? Euphoria, as well. The girl was ready to burst with it.

"Looks like he already opened some of them." I grabbed Amber's can opener and gave the 'Maisel' can a quick shake. Even before I cracked it open, I could feel the ashes inside, just waiting for the two of us to say hello. "What's the worst that could happen?" I said, grinning.

Amber stared at me, but didn't answer.

Despite Amber's rules, turns out swallowing ashes works just fine, no snorting necessary. Ghosts really aren't all that fussy.

That first time I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Amber though, her hand trembled as she held the red-and-white straw to her lips.

"Old souls take me away," she mumbled, and then tilted her head back, swallowing the contents down in one long slide. She didn't even bother with a sugar chaser. Almost immediately her face seemed to harden, her skin flushed a bloody red, her lips pinched and cracking. When she spoke her eyes looked far too dark. "Your turn, dearest." The laugh that followed was a gritty rough sound, nothing like my Amber.

I sucked in my own strawful. It was like being rinsed clean, my own thoughts tossed aside as

I slipped into someone else's groove. Forget indulging in her sad-sack games. Maisel and I had another agenda.

Amber didn't look angry anymore and she didn't look scared. Her entire torso trembled, as though under the thrall of some kind of palsy. She stood in the middle of that damp basement, the musty scent of mold filling her nostrils as her eyes rolled and her cracked lips bled. Meanwhile, my own body was getting warmer, burning up. No shakes, though. No spirit visions either. Just heat, as though the energy from Amber's shaking body was combusting me from the inside out. My hands reached for her, tearing at her T-shirt, her jeans, at that thin piece of cotton between her legs.

"Don't worry, baby," Maisel said, using Amber's voice. "I still like to fuck."

Maisel, it turned out, was good at transporting things – one piece at a time. He wasn't the only one. But Maisel was the first. A fragment of Amber traveled through to the other side with our very first hit of ash. Fairy tale transformation ragged piece by ragged piece.

"Amber..." I leaned toward her, brushing the hair away from her face. Even in the dim, morning light, I could see the bruises along her neck. My own body was no better: nail gouges across my lower back crusted and stiff, across my cheeks as well.

"Don't," Amber said, wiping a thin coating of ash from her lips.

"Sunstone?" a voice called from the top of the stairs. "Are you down there?"

Footsteps followed and then the click of an overhead light.

Amber's mom kept her eyes on the desk and the three open cans, rather than our own blood-and-bruised selves. "I told you they could help."

"Sometimes. They haven't taken *you* anywhere," Amber managed to shoot back.

"They will. Of course, they will. It was your dad's fault. He's the one who told them to keep me out." Mrs Destros glanced our way, not quite catching our eyes, then turned and headed back toward the stairs.

"She always was a burnout," Amber whispered.

And then, just like that, Amber and I started laughing, Maisel too, his voice ice-cold as it exit-



ed my throat and lungs. The other ghosts joined in: Josephina with her blood-red scream – and little Wallace. Only a boy, Wallace, stayed mostly silent, just wanting to draw more of those black cartoon elephants on the basement floor.

It was a matter of moments and a two-dollar can opener, and then Amber was taping another paper straw, shaking out another bit of ash onto the water-stained desk.

“Maybe this time they’ll take me all the way through,” she said, always the true believer. Her magic, fairy tale ending just one ashy, line away.

Me? I was too busy reaching for her naked and bruised body to even notice.

Outsiders think of Portland or maybe Salem as the heart of Oregon, but the truth is it’s the empty stretches that hold our state’s deepest secrets. Oregon’s fairy tales are dry and brutal, scattered with dust.

I wasn’t the only one. Most people miss the important things. Few have even heard of Oregon’s sunstone. One of those seemingly worthless gems that people think are best left below the ground. Amber’s mom wasn’t entirely wrong. Shine them up just right and the copper platelets in those sunstones look exactly like the sunset flecks in Amber’s eyes.

Don’t know how I missed it. The girl was a goddess even before she finished traveling through.

And me, I’ve lived in Oregon long enough to finally learn some of her secret truths. Drive those vacant, mid-state miles and eventually you’ll find her. You’ll find them all: Josephina, Maisel, even sweet little Wallace. Amber’s copper eyes are shining out from each of those unwanted Oregon rocks.

Waiting.

Perhaps one day, if I drive long enough, I’ll find the way through. Perhaps Amber is trying even now, trying to show me the way to her secret path.

Julie C. Day graduated from the Stonecoast M.F.A. program. She also holds a masters degree in microbiology. By day Julie writes IT documents, as well as documents of the more clearly fictional variety. Either way she works while standing and with a regular infusion of tea. You can find Julie online at [www.stillwingingit.com](http://www.stillwingingit.com) and [@thisjulieday](http://@thisjulieday).

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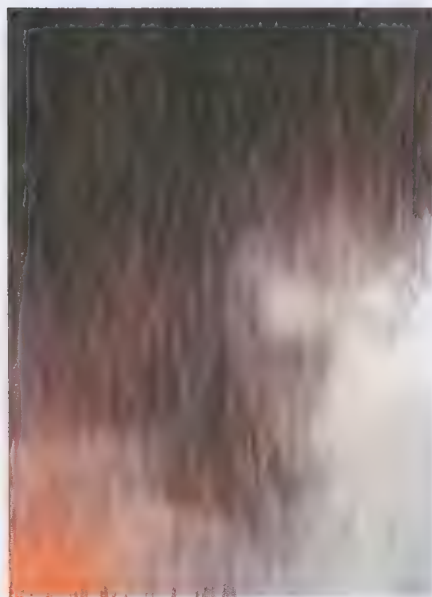
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# SAM J. MILLER

## SONGS LIKE FREIGHT TRAINS



Illustrated by Richard Wagner

“I’m worried that a song will never again change my life.”

My husband doesn’t look up from his phone. Windshield wipers flick water away as fast as they can. Autumn, full dark; driving to Albany to our daughter’s first dance performance. He is dressed up, scented, slightly uncomfortable. We rarely wear nice clothes. Three minutes pass before he says “You’re not going to give me any more context?”

“So you *are* listening.”

“I am.”

“Because...you don’t look like you’re listening.”

He smiles, sets the phone down, leans sideways to aim an ear at me. I’m not mad at him. Not really.

“That never happened to you? You heard a song on the radio or at a party, or you went to a punk show, and you knew you’d never be the same?”

“Sure,” he says, his voice all *Christine-you’re-not-thinking-things-through*. “But that’s not necessarily a good thing. The only reason a song or movie or book can change your life when you’re a kid is because you don’t know who you are. Because you’re so uncertain or unhappy or scared that you’ll grab onto anything.”

“That’s a good point,” I say, because it is, because he is full of them. The phone comes back out. I want to say so many things. I say none of them.

Instead, I turn the radio on. I keep one hand on the wheel while I dial through layers of static. Occasional squawks of pop and classical, Christian bluster and NPR calm, settling on some harmless barely-remembered rock jangle.

Silence blooms between us; the easy silence of the long-married. Except lately I wonder how easy it is. Whether this calm peaceful comfort I feel when we’re together is something we share, or is all in my head. What he’s looking for, when he looks into his phone.

And then, over the fade-out of one song, a too-familiar series of chords. My chest has time to tighten, before—

"For all I know everyone can do it," Ariel says, her mall-dyed hair bright as fire in the candlelight. "But I don't think so."

Wind rattles the glass in her windowpanes. The house is old, big, bought by Ariel's freight-train magnate father, full of ghosts and sounds and furniture terrifying to trailer-park-raised me. We are sixteen. My skin prickles, as if from a sudden temperature drop – as if, an instant ago, I was somewhere else: somewhere warm, dark, safe, dry in spite of rain. A faint whiff of man lingers in my nose and then is gone.

"You need to start with a song you have a really strong childhood connection to," she said. "Preferably one that you associate with a vivid sense memory. Like, a song you heard at the county fair, while eating fried dough. Something like that. Understand?"

"I guess," I say, thinking frantically.

"It has to be something we can actually listen to, here and now," she said. "The Beatles are best. Because my parents have all their albums, and I bet yours do too."

"They do."

Kurt Cobain looks down on us from a dozen posters. His death is a raw fresh wound that throbs whenever I make eye contact with his image. I am still a little bit scared of my best friend: her wisdom, her fearlessness, her hunger. Her money. She is a marvelous specimen of a separate species. A witch. A monster. So I wasn't surprised when she told me she had trained her brain to travel through time just by listening to music.

"Okay," I say. "'Octopus's Garden.' The day of my grandma's funeral, my mom played it a lot. And she had taken back all this catered food from the funeral home, and there were these slices of ham, and I ate like a million of them."

"Off of *Abbey Road*," she says. "Perfect. We've got that one. Wait right here."

When she is gone, and I am alone with the Kurts, I stand up to stretch my legs and then casually explore her room. Every time I come here it has transformed: there's a shrine now, before a mirror, with a stack of women torn from magazines, and a circle of ash where she's fed their sisters to the flame. And a tiny steel rectangle: the razor she uses only on her inner thighs, now, where no teachers can see and call her parents.

"Jesus, Christine," he says, switching the music off, jerking the wheel from my hands.

"Wh—" I start, and then stop. I don't know whether I want to say *What happened?* or *Where am I?* or *Who are you?* And then the present comes crashing in, Ariel's bedroom fading like the bad dream that it is. I am married, I am a mother, I'm inching towards forty.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Thirty seconds of 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' and you go into a fucking fugue state?"

The car settles into a stop. The wind shrieks, rocks us.

"Sorry," I say, shaking. A weird rare form of epilepsy brought on by music, I told him, long ago, when we were first dating, at a party, when a song made me trance out so completely that I collapsed mid-dance.

"Do you need to see somebody about this? A neurologist, or something? It's getting worse."

"No," I say, foot to the gas pedal. "No. I'm fine. I'm just tired. I haven't been sleeping so well, lately. Because of her."

He grunt-nods. Our daughter is sixteen. A smart, beautiful, talented nightmare. She has changed us; made us better and worse. Me more than him.

"There's a convenience store up ahead," I say. "I think we could both use a cup of coffee."

In the thin light from strobing streetlights overhead, the years can't be seen on his face. He is still dashing. Still desirable. Men leave for lots of reasons. If I got sick, or lost my job, would he bail on me? Does he see the new inches at my midsection? Does he dream of finding a pre-motherhood me?

When he's inside, I switch the radio back on in time for the final thirty seconds of the song.

"Oh my god that is so weird," I say, clamping both hands over my mouth, which is full of the taste of funeral ham.

"It worked?"

I nod. Ariel shrieks in delighted triumph, throws up her long lean arms. "I didn't know if I could really do it. Teach someone else."

'Octopus's Garden' bleeds into 'I Want You (She's So Heavy)', my least favorite song on the album. But even that one feels too raw, too real,



now. For the first time I am conscious of the incredible weight of a song, how much power is contained inside of it. What a song can do to you. "Magic," I whisper.

"Not magic," Ariel says sternly. "Science. There's a method to it. Anyone can learn. It's a glitch of the brain that I accidentally figured out how to exploit."

"And nobody in history ever knew about it before you?"

"Maybe they did. Maybe everyone can do it, to different degrees, and I just have a particular sensitivity, and figured out how to crank it up. You need to keep practicing those thought exercises I taught you, on your own. It's a skill, like playing the piano. Pretty soon you'll be able to do some amazing things."

I nod. She presses buttons, and the taut taunting guitar line of 'Come As You Are' starts up. A freight train wails, in the valley far beneath us. Rolling slow through the scattered trailer parks where my parents will be wondering where I am.

I am me, still. Now Me, Married Grown-up Me, alive and conscious inside Teenage Me. An observer; along for the ride. Shocked at the strength and joy and fear inside this little body. Frightened of the love I feel, still, for Ariel. The conviction I would follow her anywhere.

"An artist committing suicide is, like, tampering with the space-time continuum," she says, looking up at Kurt Cobain. "Think how much shittier music will be now, without him. Think how different music would be, thirty years from now, if he had stayed alive and kept making music."

In two weeks, she will be dead. She'll hang herself from the high bare beams of that old and haunted house. She will tamper with my space-time continuum.

The song ends. He is still in the store, on line, behind three teenagers. Trying to keep from looking at the cigarette display case. I lift my fingers to my face and smell, still, on my hands, the expensive soap of Ariel's bathroom.

It wasn't always this bad. In the years after Ariel's death her magic trick – her scientific skill – got stronger, got worse, as I went deeper. I practiced the tricks Ariel taught me, the concen-

trations and the repetitions. Sense impressions like scents spread, until a song could conjure up whole scenes. My passion for music was such that I couldn't stop myself, couldn't keep from wading further into the river of Ariel's magic trick. Because it was always magic to me. As much as she rationalized it as science, a form of elaborate self-hypnosis that allowed the physical re-experience of past memories, for me it was always time travel, sorcery, with all the terror and transgression that entailed.

By college a concert was dangerous; by thirty I had stopped listening to my favorite albums. Because there was no telling what wild and desperate moment the Pixies or Prince might plop me back into. Every time I heard a song, it added a whole new set of memories – mix tapes on midnight road trips, summer evenings sitting drunk on the porches of rented beach houses. The winter circle of firelight; autumn rain in the garden. Every listen added another car to the freight train, and every listen after that could spin me back into any of them.

His phone is still on the seat. I switch it on, scroll through his recent stuff. I don't know why. Or what I hope to find. There are no dating site apps, no browser history of Craigslist hook-up posts. He reads the news, his RSS feeds. He scans the social media statuses of friends we no longer see. *Life is very sad*, I think, seeing a comment he left on a photo posted by his childhood best friend.

My daughter thinks there's something wrong with me. What kind of person doesn't love music? Doesn't ever play records? Leaves the room when a song comes on; gets anxiety about supermarket shopping because you never know what will come on over the in-store radio? She doesn't know about my sorcery-science, or even the epilepsy cover story. She thinks losing your passion for music is something that happens to grown-ups when their hearts die. I want to protest the unfairness of this – *it's not that I have no passion, it's that I have too much!* But sometimes I'm not entirely sure she's wrong. What's the difference, really, between abandoning the music you used to live for because it no longer moves you, and abandoning it because it moves you too much? Does everyone reach a place where a

song can no longer change their lives?

"Hey," he says, handing me my coffee. Dark and sweet, perfect.

We drive in silence. I watch the road, he watches his phone. A new pack of cigarettes sits on his lap. Looking guilty, he slips it into a pocket. My love for him has sharpened, suddenly, into something I haven't felt in a long time. Not romantic, not sexual: something deeper, purer, more terrifying. A child's love, greedy and primal, coupled with an adolescent's certainty that this person can make me the person I am meant to be. I feel her in me, the child I was when I knelt in Ariel's bedroom amid candles and careless heaps of thrift-store clothing, the first truly safe place I'd ever found. I feel all over again how desperately and helplessly she loved her best friend, that girl I used to be. I want to cry. I try to take deep breaths. I can't. I remember her, Ariel, so terrified of change she'd choose death over entering adulthood.

"Do you know what she's going to dance to?" I ask, to say something.

"No idea. You know she doesn't talk to me any more than she talks to you."

"What are we going to do, if she gets into Juilliard?"

He puts his phone away. Puts his head in his hands. Looks up at me. "Christ, Christine, I don't know. We can't afford it. Not in a million years. Unless she gets a full ride..."

"Yeah."

We both know she won't.

"It'll kill her," he says. "She's been talking about it since she was six."

"It's terrible to be in a place where we're hoping she doesn't get in. At least then we're not the bad guys."

He nods. We both watch the road, now.

I ask: "Did you have something like that, when you were her age? Something you wanted so much that nothing else seemed to matter?"

"To lose my virginity?" He chuckles, then coughs. "For a while I wanted to be a rock star."

"I didn't know that."

"I was in about six hundred bands. Just me and my friends talking about it a lot. Most of us didn't even play any instruments. Never prac-

ticed together. Changed names every five minutes. Pillow, Panacea, The New Creatures. Drew logos in textbooks. Standard stupid teenage shit."

But from the way he watches the night roll past him, I can see how much it meant to him. His brow furrows as he shuffles through memory scraps. The moments that changed his life, that he can't quite recall now. The smell inside long-closed bars. Drunken late-night movie arguments. Time takes so much away from us. If a song could send him back there, into the body of that very-different boy, would he ever come back?

"What about you?" he asks.

"I was shockingly unambitious as a teenager. I just wanted to survive."

"Well then. At least you can say your dreams came true."

I know what he is thinking. How? Is it pheromones, sorcery, the mere accretion of so many years alongside someone? He's thinking what I'm thinking. He's thinking of where he came from. We're thinking of where we can't go back. The Lowlands trailer parks where I grew up are underwater half the year now – the freight train tracks abandoned – and the Brooklyn of his childhood has grown so expensive his grandmother was murdered by someone working for her landlord, desperate to get her out and rent to someone richer. Our jobs are fragile – twigs that barely support our weight, and may snap at any moment in the winds of software innovation or the shifting trade tariffs of faraway countries. That's why my fingers fidget, half-wanting to switch on the radio and flash back to Teenage Me again. Her fear of the future is such a welcome escape from the stress of my present.

My daughter dances magnificently. In our living room, on the beach on family vacations, at the corner waiting for the bus. She dances with headphones on, for my benefit. She becomes the song. Watching her, I can feel it. She doesn't know it but she's my surrogate, translating art I won't allow myself to hear into something I can see.

We arrive at the high school where the Tri-County talent show is happening. Laughter fills the parking lot. A bottle breaks. The past is too



present, here: the weight and call of my own high school days, how easy it might be to step back into who I was then. For the first time, I see that there's a reason I've been so scared to abandon myself to a song, and it's not just the fear of re-experiencing some particularly ugly event. I worry what Teenage Me will do to Now Me. I don't want the two of them getting too close. And I worry what other dark magic Ariel could have transmitted from her brain to mine. She taught my brain how to travel through time; what if more time with her teaches me how to take myself out of the space-time continuum altogether?

"Ariel Hosking," says the announcer, and my daughter steps out onto the stage. We are darkened. She wears all black, her hair expertly bunned. She is a dancer. My Ariel nods to someone off-stage, and the song starts.

A bass line, sad and happy all at once. Nirvana. My nose fills up with the smell of my childhood best friend's bedroom. *I don't want to go back*, I think.

My husband turns to me, panicked. Poised for action. Ready to drag me out of there if he has to. We are old, we are slow, but he would still fight like a boar to protect me. "It's okay," I whisper.

*I want to go back*, I think.

His hand clasps mine. Our fingers interlace: a swift and elegant gesture. Nothing is promised to us. Tomorrow may see everything we love taken away. But this is what I have now. Ariel was wrong: it *is* magic. Every song is magic. Every song we love can trigger the time-travel nodes of the brain. A dead man's voice comes in, singing low and sad. The song hits me like love, like loss, like a river in reverse, like a freight train bearing me north to the abandoned cities of the selves I have been.

Sam J. Miller is a writer and a community organiser. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Lightspeed*, *Shimmer*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Minnesota Review*, and *The Rumpus*, among others. He is a winner of the Shirley Jackson Award, a graduate of the 2012 Clarion Writers' Workshop, and the co-editor of *Horror After 9/11*, an anthology published by the University of Texas Press. Visit him at [www.samjmilller.com](http://www.samjmilller.com).

All Raym wants to do is give up smoking. So why is his entire life falling apart? Why are new mistakes and old terrors conspiring against him? Why is he being plagued by the very worst spectre from his childhood? And why does giving up suddenly - horrifically - feel much, much more like giving in?

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Graeme Shimmin



## TWEMBER

Steve Rasnic Tem

NewCon Press hb, 176pp, £18.99

## Peter Tennant

*Twember* is the latest entry in the Imaginings series from NewCon Press, each volume of which will "feature the work of a single selected author, bringing together the very best of that author's previously published but uncollected short fiction, as chosen by the author themselves, plus original stories". In the case of *Twember* the selected author is Steve Rasnic Tem, who is primarily known for his horror and weird fiction output, but here shows what he can do when he chooses to dabble in the science fiction genre.

Opening story 'A Letter from the Emperor' put me in mind of the Foundation universe of Isaac Asimov, but here with the space opera elements given a very human dimension, as the sole surviving crew member of a messenger ship visits a remote outpost of a galactic empire and brings a little joy into the life of a retiring official by faking a letter of commendation from the emperor. This is a gentle story that touches on so much – the

remoteness and uncertainty of our political collectives, the shifting nature of memory, the need for a human side to the most colossal of enterprises – entertaining for the way in which it plays with human foibles, and seeming to show that our basic nature, with the need for recognition, will remain the same no matter how far we spread throughout the galaxy.

Title story 'Twember' originally appeared in *Interzone* #239 and is set in a world where society has been undermined by the sudden appearance of artificial structures that move through the landscape like icebergs. They appear to be shards of frozen time or memory, and Will, the protagonist of the story, refers to them as "escarpments", and in the way they effect the world, with past events and memories thrown up at random, I think an argument could be made for them being an externalisation of dementia – Will's father, who suffers from dementia, is the only one who seems content and at peace in this uncertain world. Tem's apocalyptic vision is impressively rendered on the page, but his story is focused on Will and the family unit he is trying to hold together, as they adjust their expectations to suit the altered circumstances, finding serenity and acceptance of a kind, with the feeling that while they must abandon physical things they can still cling to something that represents essentially who they are.

In 'The Day Before the Day Before' an operative of an agency that works to change the past in subtle ways is abandoned in a different time period after he fails in his mission, the story setting up an opposition between views of pragmatism and the universality of suffering, but focusing on the human dimension, with the man remembering his family and the things that have been lost. A former soldier who maintains a



park's artificial environment in 'Pathetic Fallacy' encounters a wild child who changes his ideas about how he should conduct himself, so that when she tries to leave him he calls the authorities to capture her for her own good, the story showing how brittle our values can become. The brief 'Forward' marks the idea that nothing really changes, only the technology with which we express ourselves.

'Visitors' has an elderly couple visiting their criminal son who has been imprisoned in a cryogenic facility so that he will suffer eternally, the story heartfelt and moving as it shows us the cruelty of what is being done, contrasting our attitude to animals with that to humans, and at the end concluding with the idea of the comforting lie that enables both parents and child to continue with their existence. Dead children are brought back as 'Cubs' and go off on a camping trip, the story exploring the idea that perhaps death should be an end, that sometimes the reality of continuing on is too horrific to contemplate, as here with a child committing a terrible act and a conspiracy of silence to cover up what has taken place. As metaphor, the story touches on the issue of letting go, of how we can sour both our own life and that of those we care for by clinging on to a past moment.

Longevity is conferred on the most valued members of society in 'Forty-three Thousand Sunsets', but the cost to others is severe restrictions on the right to reproduce that cause social upheaval and civil unrest. There's a struldbrug quality to the life of city architect Brian, as he witnesses countless changes but loses his capacity to keep track of them with the onset of a form of dementia, the story both sad and chilling in its depiction of the life

he clings on to, asking if it really is worth the high price.

'Ephemera' is the longest story in the book, and one that deftly dramatises the conflict between progress and the need to hang on to things of value. Book dealer Ascher convincingly ridicules collector Daniel's addiction to digital books, wanting books to be cherished as objects in themselves, but later we learn that his house has become a mausoleum of sorts, piles of books on every side, his inability to let go of things that have outlived their purpose holding Ascher back in a powerful story that presents both sides of the argument, soliciting our sympathy and compassion for the protagonists, while at the same time showing how even our own children can become strangers to us, and then ending on a note of triumph, with the objects of the past transfigured into art in the present, though it is perhaps a pyrrhic victory.

Tom wakes from a cryogenic sleep to find that aliens are 'At Play in the Fields', the human race having fallen from its technological peak, but his attempts to find a place in this new society flounder in a kind of existential angst, with questions that only he can answer for himself, or to which perhaps there are no answers. The story is mirrored in 'The Long Afternoon of the Human Race' in which the last surviving human in the flesh takes his leave of mankind's descendants, mechanical and virtual, with the vagaries of evolution celebrated, the story offering a sense of continuity in human life and affirming the value of the fictions with which we make sense of our condition, reminiscent in some ways of Pohl's work, as are many of these stories, and ending the collection on a positive and upbeat note, playing counterpoint to the sadness of much that preceded it.



## THE RACE

Nina Allan

NewCon Press pb, 251pp, £12.99

### Peter Tennant

Nina Allan's latest work is a book that eludes easy categorisation. For a start though it's being pitched as a science fiction novel, I'm not sure that strictly speaking either tag applies. A novel yes, but also four self-contained sections that form a greater whole. Science fiction yes, but a story in which the genre elements are both central and subordinate to a mainstream narrative. As with Allan's previous work, the brilliant *Stardust*, what we have here is fiction as a series of matryoshka dolls, each new part forcing the reader to re-evaluate and interpret anew what has gone before.

Each section takes its title from the name of the viewpoint character. Opening section 'Jenna' is set in a borderline dystopian future Britain, with the landscape soured by fracking and the populace looking back at a disastrous war that cost the lives of millions. The town of Sapphire survives on smartdog racing, an illegal activity to which the powers that be turn a blind eye, with technology used

to establish a mental/empathic link between the dogs and their handlers. Jenna makes luxury gloves for the handlers, while her brother Del is an owner, with a secondary career on the black market. Central to the plot is the abduction of his young daughter Luz Maree, who everyone calls Lumey and who may have a natural ability to “converse” with the dogs. Del hopes to raise the necessary ransom money through a smartdog race. Allan painstakingly creates this detailed world and then in ‘Christy’ reveals that it is in fact a fiction, a story by Christy Peller, and what follows involves a fascinating examination of the relationship between reality and fiction. Christy too has a brother Derek (Del), one even more unsavoury than his fictional counterpart, an abuser of women whose girlfriends have a habit of disappearing when they don’t toe his line. There are other correspondences – between Hastings and fictional Sapphire, abducted Lumey and missing Linda, the runaway mothers of Jenna/Del and Christy/Derek.

The third part is set twenty years later and focused on a meeting between Linda’s former boyfriend ‘Alex’ and Christy, who is seeking to lay the ghosts of her past, and once again what we are told forces us to reconsider what we had believed to that point, though not without an element of ambiguity. Finally we have ‘Maree’ in which we learn what happened to Lumey, how she was kept in a halfway house of sorts for many years, believing that her parents had died in a tragic accident and preparing to use her ability to communicate with smartdogs. The main part of this segment involves a steamer crossing of the Atlantic, with Lumey/Maree being sent to a research base where her talent will be further developed, but apart from the term Atlantic

all of the place names used appear to be fictional, distancing this segment from both our world and that of the story in the first section, though Allan throws us a curve ball near the end by referencing Hastings, Christy and Derek, as if the mask of fiction is slipping, a glimpse behind the wizard’s curtain. Overall it feels like Christy revisiting old material, and providing the happy ending she couldn’t write before. There are further correspondences to be drawn, with Alex mentioning a woman whose face was shot away and a pilot with a scarred visage appearing in the fourth part, Christy’s brother Derek having gone off to Australia to be with their mother and aboard the steamer a mother travelling to be reunited with her estranged son, and the Hotel Charlotte, an abandoned building Christy visited in the second section resurrected as a place of sanctuary for Maree in the fourth part.

One of Allan’s great strengths as a writer is her ability to draw convincing, fully rounded characters. She tells us far more about the lives of these people than my brief description can convey, and with the feeling that she knows even more than she chooses to reveal. In a sense everything that takes place could be seen as an exploration of Christy’s character, the writer using fiction to work through her own issues – her emotional and aesthetic needs, the wish to have a brother who is not a monster and a family unit that supports and encourages her. And, distancing ourselves yet one step further from the narrative, Christy is a fictional creation of the writer Nina Allan (in parenthesis, note the second syllable similarity between the writer’s name and that of the character Jenna Hoolan, which may or may not be significant), who is exploring

her own concerns through the medium of interlocking stories. Empathy seems to be central – that between the smartdogs and their handlers mirrored in the relationship between author and characters, with fiction as a way to make sense of our reality, and possibly reinvent it in ways that are more pleasing to us. Conversely, a lack of empathy seems to be at the heart of most of the book’s problems, as with the racism that Alex suffered in his youth and the misogyny that is Derek’s defining characteristic, and the disdain for humans that is felt by the whales that make Atlantic crossings such an ordeal in Maree’s section. And finally, there is the possibility that Maree and others are being trained to communicate with aliens, that the establishment of a way to divorce meaning from language is the goal.

This is the kind of book that requires several readings and copious note taking to do it justice in a review, but time denies me such strategies. I don’t know what it’s all about, can only hazard guesses. But I do know that Nina Allan has produced one of the finest books I’ve read this year, a novel that is beautifully written, conceptually daring, informed by compassion and a luminous intelligence. Please read it.

[newconpress.co.uk](http://newconpress.co.uk)

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### THE SEVENTH MISS HATFIELD

Anna Caltabiano

Gollancz hb, 248pp, £14.99

**Jack Deighton**

In 1954 an eleven-year-old girl named Cynthia carries a wrongly delivered parcel to its correct destination across the road. There she meets Miss Hatfield, who has a collection of portraits and antiques plus a strange clock with unusual intervals marking its dial. Miss Hatfield gives Cynthia a glass of lemonade into which she has poured the last drop of liquid from a vial. Within a few pages – bare minutes of conversation, and no change of scene – Cynthia has become a fully grown woman. The physics of this transformation, the chemistry required, its energetics, are all not so much skimmed over or ignored as seemingly unconsidered. The process is only a means for Caltabiano to propel her narrator into the story she wishes to tell. It does of course also signal Cynthia's altered reality.

Miss Hatfield tells Cynthia the fateful drop was the last remnant of a bottle filled from a mysterious lake stumbled upon by Juan Ponce de León on his first voyage to Florida. The liquid confers immortality on its drinkers. The

Misses Hatfield have been employing it to recruit new versions of themselves ever since it came into their hands. Moreover they use the strange clock – which an early Miss Hatfield just happened upon – to navigate time. Miss Hatfield informs her new protégé time is not a river, but a lake; existing all at once. Quite why a clock would then be a suitable device to use to sail on it is odd. Moreover, how it actually manages to achieve this feat is never divulged. Again, it just happens.

Cynthia accepts the actions of Miss Hatfield, plus her subsequent demands to go to 1904 to steal a portrait, indeed begins to think of herself as Rebecca Hatfield, the seventh such, amazingly readily. In no time at all, corseted and long-skirted, she is rushing off through carless streets to the house of Charles Beauford, who fortuitously takes her for his niece Margaret. There she meets his son Henley who, despite knowing she cannot be his cousin, plays along with the deception. The seventh Miss Hatfield has something of a charmed life, it seems.

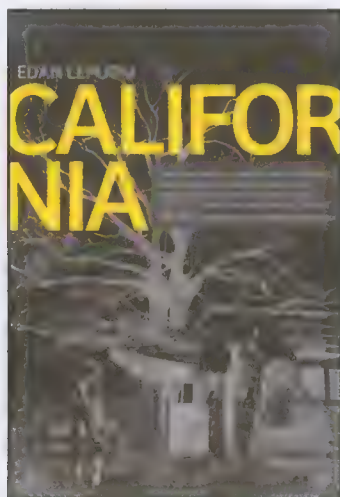
This is fine as far as it goes but here the story gets bogged down as Caltabiano's over-arching fantasy becomes somewhat lost amid the details of the burgeoning relationship between Henley and his "cousin". True, every so often the new Miss Hatfield (she forgets her past life all too easily) remembers she is supposed to be stealing the painting and also experiences a growing sense of wrongness associated with being out of time but this is all diluted by the routines of daily life in a well-to-do Edwardian household and a preponderance of "playful" dialogue. Even the appearance of the Porter sisters, Christine and Eliza (the first of whom and Henley are effectively promised to each other, the second is by far the most interesting character in

the book) does not give Rebecca a quick way back to her own time – or later. Cynthia/Rebecca/Margaret also has a very modern idea of servants' individuality and sense of self but is annoyingly gauche. Her discovery of what the reader sees as links between the Misses Hatfield and the elder Mr Beauford does not give her pause about her sponsor's motives.

The accompanying promotional blurb makes much of Caltabiano's youth. That earns no free pass here; but Caltabiano can write – even if she occasionally employs awkward sentence constructions and lacks quite the necessary feel for the detail of late nineteenth/early twentieth century speech and mores. In their trip to the country, Henley drives the automobile himself. Families like his had chauffeurs for such tasks. And I doubt that, once the car had broken down, an unmarried man and woman at that time (cousins or not) would be allowed to sleep in the same space – even if it was a barn.

There are other details which niggled. Except in the most unusual circumstances would her assumed persona as Mr Beauford's sister's daughter still have his surname? The sixth Miss Hatfield refers to being shown a photo sometime in the early 1840s. So early? Eliza mentions that ever since reading Jules Verne she has wondered about the possibility of time travel. (Oh dear. Unless this is an altered universe in which Verne actually wrote any such stories.) The women take part at a burial. In 1904?

Caltabiano's story of time-crossed love is never entirely convincing, the book's resolution a touch rushed, the supposed poignancy of the epilogue not fully earned by the preceding pages and the speculative content comes down to trappings. There are two more novels to come, though.



## CALIFORNIA

Edan Lepucki

Little Brown hb, 388pp, £14.99

### Maureen Kincaid Speller

The publicity material for Edan Lepucki's *California* suggests that if you love Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* you will also love this novel, which is akin to saying that if one likes Veuve Clicquot, this can of own-brand cola is very similar. While McCarthy's novel is a powerful and disturbing meditation on the will to survive when all seems lost, *California* is by contrast a trivial account of a couple trying to survive in a cabin in the forests of Northern California after the infrastructure finally collapses under the weight of one earthquake, one bad winter, one plague too many.

Frida, the focal character for the first part of the narrative, is maddeningly vague about the nature of the catastrophe. We know it took some time to happen, long enough for melted-down gold to become a viable currency (and we also know it took a year for Cal and Frida to save up to buy enough fuel to leave LA) but the truth is that Frida neither knows nor particularly cares. What started out as a romantic adventure has become tedious,

possibly because Frida apparently sits at home all day while Cal sets traps and tends their vegetable plots. While Cal digs, Frida mourns the loss of capitalist goodies, represented by her cache of artefacts, including a Device that no longer functions (we infer this is some sort of tablet computer), a ripped shower cap and, bizarrely, a pristine turkey baster. She remembers with particularly deep affection the little pink clamshell case in which her contraceptive pills were kept, though perhaps everything we need to know about Frida is encapsulated in her naming her current existence the afterlife. While Cal is present in the moment, Frida is in hell.

While Frida, clearly not pioneer material, just wants to retreat to the 1950s and be looked after by Cal, the product of a small private college which taught Thoreauvian survival skills and values, has come to realise that self-reliance only works at the community level, but doesn't really want to admit it as he rather likes the solitude. When Frida discovers she is pregnant, and becomes afraid that they won't be able to deal with raising a child on their own, the couple finally look for other groups nearby and the nature of the story is such that they don't have to look too hard (this is California, after all). Except, and this is one of the big revelations of the novel, the community doesn't want children.

Much of the second half of the novel is devoted to unravelling the mystery of how this edict came into being, where the existing children went, and also the greater mystery of how the community continues to survive. Well, that, and for Frida, marvelling over the delights of more clothes, better shower facilities and the miraculous appearance of cooking ingredients (it suddenly turns out that she used to work as a commercial baker). For Cal, satisfaction comes

in being finally able to put his horticultural skills to use now he has the right equipment and earning the respect of the community.

As a traditional science-fiction novel, *California* is incredibly unsatisfactory. The multiple natural disasters provide the flimsiest accounting for the retreat to gated communities or to the land, depending on your previous economic circumstances – even in post-apocalyptic California, it's all about the right neighbourhood – yet ask how any of this works and no sensible answer emerges. And if one chooses to read *California* as meta-SF, there are too many gaps in the background that cannot be easily explained away. It is difficult too to engage with the foreground narrative of a young and rather ordinary couple, making a rather poor fist of surviving in the wilderness while they try to face up to their own basic incompatibility, with an afterthought of a mystery tacked on.

One could choose to read the novel as a satire on the attitudes of genuine back-to-the-landers. Frida dreams about lattes, and is obsessed with 'stuff', while Cal, though he learned to set traps at college, can't seem able to use his theoretical knowledge to avoid hunger. Yet I don't think Lepucki intends this novel to be anything other than a perfectly straightforward attempt to imagine the struggles of a young couple in post-apocalyptic America.

And even that might have been interesting had Lepucki gone into greater detail. Alas, her characters are psychologically two-dimensional, staying firmly on the page, voicing the thoughts their author has on their behalf. The only reason they haven't already starved and been eaten by scavengers is authorial fiat, which keeps the novel moving long after it ought to have quietly crept into a hole and died.





**THE UNREAL AND THE REAL:  
SELECTED STORIES OF  
URSULA K. LE GUIN VOLUME  
1: WHERE ON EARTH**  
**Ursula K. Le Guin**

Gollancz hb, 218pp, £16.99

**John Howard**

Ursula Le Guin has been a fixed point for decades now. Not in the sense of never changing, developing, doing something new – but fixed as a star is. She's always in view, somehow or another. So many books, so many stories... And now a Selected Stories has been deemed necessary. It is certainly desirable.

In the introduction Le Guin lays out the criteria for her selection: determined to reveal something of the process of "choosing and dividing". Not surprisingly, the Stories are *very* Selected. This first of two volumes consists of those for which the subtitle 'Where on Earth' could be a relevant question: the real, presumably. (But that main title reads: 'and' – not 'or'.)

So even as Le Guin states that she can do realism, providing plenty of it here, we can still look right past it into that unreal. Or just bump around into both, leaving blood soaking into the

stone that seems present, in one form or another, shaped, worked – or natural – throughout these stories, eighteen of them. All are sharp-edged, scented, full of weather, tastes and sensations. There's so much going on, so many hinterlands. Of course they're not real, even though they are.

Here are some of the high points.

Orsinia is a familiar (although now fading from memory) sort of Central Europe. Included here are four of the tales from that country in which things not only 'just happen' but where men and women still have to learn to be men and women. Each story, although independent, builds on the previous and mixes the mortar for the next. "So it is like a stone of power, and who sets foot on it may be transformed." It doesn't come much better than this.

The other real place not quite on any map is the small town of Klatsand, somewhere on the Oregon coast. Again, the stories, each one separate, also interpenetrate. In 'Hand, Cup, Shell' a graduate student arrives to interview the widow of a famous educator, but ignores her professor's prepared questions and embarks on a series of her own. The title – something of the body, a created artefact, a natural object – describes the intensity and existence of the sound to be heard when each is put to the ear, the culminating image when the dead is revealed to be the only reality.

Oregon is (definitely and naturally) the setting for the delightfully, shiftingly, eye-confusingly titled 'Ether, OR' in which that town seems to be as restless as its people. No one seems very much bothered, either: perhaps their own wanderings – in time, space, and relationships – are equal to not knowing exactly in which part of the state Ether

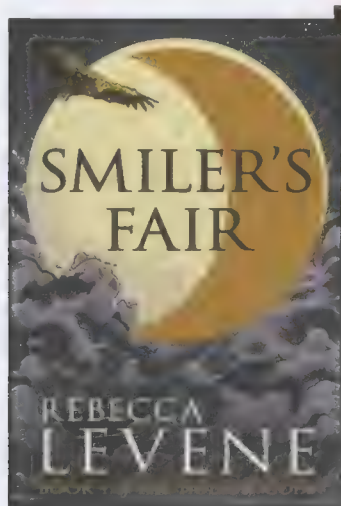
is, or, when they are there, the precise state of their connections with relatives – actual, potential, past.

Probably the best-known story here is the twice award-winning 'Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight' – where the realism takes on desert tinges as a young girl, lost there, is aided by its 'people'. We're sort of in on the secret from the beginning, and it's an open secret, because all it takes to see is to look the right way, and with the right equipment (not just plain, or even distorted, sight) and attitude.

Le Guin leaves us, still on Earth, with 'Half Past Four' – another story that's inhabited, rather than just read trapped within paper and covers held in front of the eyes. Like several of the stories here, at first it seems to be another family piece, with different generations rubbing along or grazing each other if not actually colliding. But it is actually a mini collection of pieces, a constellation rather than a single star, split or distorted into fragments. Le Guin does realism.

To read *Where on Earth* is to start out from home, looking for paths and signposts and following the tracks and traces of those who have travelled ahead. There's no map, apart from what's been memorised from before, or recollected in something, hopefully, like tranquillity. The landscape is not alien, and there are not likely to be Tygers at large (don't bank on it, though). Fortunately there are fixed points, recognisable things: a road is a road, a horse is... that'll do.

The people, though, those inhabitants we meet on the way: they are a different matter. They (usually, probably) do know where on Earth they are – but will they be prepared to tell? Can they? Just be grateful to be in Ursula Le Guin's company throughout.



### SMILER'S FAIR

Rebecca Levene

Hodder & Stoughton hb, 416pp, £14.99

**Stephen Theaker**

"They say the fair holds one example of all that there is in the world – every food, every spice, every pleasure and every vice," says nobleman Lahiru, who, though married with three children, will be "hunting the finest boy flesh to be had for many miles" during his visit. Smiler's Fair is a travelling city, drawn by mammoths from place to place, because no one stays still for too long in this world. Do so and the worm men will get you! The fair, home to scoundrels, scum and psychopaths, takes a daily census of its inhabitants and visitors, and when the first death comes the fair moves on. For our cast, all roads pass through this exciting, squalid, movable feast.

Krish's birth father, King Nayan, wanted him dead to undo a prophecy. Cut from his mother's belly and stolen away, Krish knows nothing of that, and lives as a shepherd until a brush with the king's flying squad sets him on the run. Lady Nethmi has been sent by her uncle to marry old Lord Thilak, but he already has a good

woman to share his bed.

Eric is a teenage sellcock, growing too old for the sleazy customers of his owner, Madam Aeronwen. He

decides to follow his favourite client home from the fair. Dae Hyo, perhaps the last of his tribe, would avenge the murder of his people and reclaim his homeland; trouble is, he's also a recovering alcoholic chased out of town after he fell asleep on the job and got a team of miners killed by the worm men.

*Smiler's Fair* is very much the first part of a series, and doesn't work brilliantly as a standalone novel. The protagonists move around the board, but few of their stories progress very far. It feels like threads were added till there were enough to fill the pages, rather than because they were truly needed. There's a common theme to some of them, of scorned and mistreated wives: the woman who adopted Krish, beaten by the husband she always wanted to leave; Nethmi, an unwilling wife with an uncaring husband; Babi, wife of gay lord Lahiru, humiliated by the lover brought into their home. But with no common catalyst, it feels oddly coincidental that these life-changing adventures all begin at once.

The prose style feels uncomplicated and perhaps even deliberately simplified: in one five-page section I looked at, ninety-five per cent of the text was made up of one and two-syllable words, with only two of eighteen hundred words reaching five syllables. It feels like the language is pitched at someone with the reading age of eleven or twelve, though the content is far too salty for that age group. This makes it an easy and accessible book to

read, but once you notice it's hard not to feel like the book is talking down to you.

Levene's editorial work on the excellent Doctor Who line from Virgin Books was very well regarded, and this feels rather like a book written by a canny editor who has surveyed the market, thought about what will be marketable (it will appeal to fans of *Game of Thrones*), and produced a book designed to fit the bill. Some parts are a bit corny – one man becomes the captive of a society of women, who of course require impregnation! – but it's a solid adventure and I enjoyed reading it. I'm sure it will find fans, though I probably won't read any sequels: I'm not worried about the characters, nor really intrigued by the trundly setting.

The worm men are frightening at first, but the premise of the book, that they can't dig up into your home if it's on the move (because the sun poisons the land against them), was unconvincing, and felt like an arbitrary way to set this world in motion. For me that world is in some ways too similar to our own: there are mammoths, but also snakes, cows, horses, goats, rats, etc. Maybe it is our world, or maybe it's just parallel evolution, but the inclusion of Earth Prime animals in a fantasy novel always feels to me like a wasted opportunity. It's ironic that fantasy is often less adventurous than science fiction when it comes to these things.

Promisingly, events later in the book suggest that the Hollow Gods of the series title might play a bigger role in future volumes. More weirdness and magic would certainly have made this book more appealing, and it might prove easier to take an interest in the lives of these mostly unpleasant characters if they were set in opposition to gods who are even worse.





## GREEN PLANETS

edited by Gerry Canavan & Kim Stanley Robinson

Wesleyan University Press hb, 307pp, \$85

### Lawrence Osborn

*Green Planets* is a collection of papers jointly edited by a professor of English literature, Gerry Canavan, and Kim Stanley Robinson. It explores "the close relationship between science fiction, ecology, and environmentalism" and "considers how science fiction writers have been working through this crisis". Canavan introduces the volume with a historical overview of environmentally conscious SF. He offers some explanation of terms that will be used and sets the scene for the structure of book, which is built around opposing understandings of utopia and dystopia in language appropriated by Samuel Delany from W.H. Auden.

Part 1 is entitled 'Arcadias and New Jerusalems' and contains four chapters exploring the long-standing opposition between pastoral and urban utopias. Christina Alt's opening chapter offers a depressing comparison of two of H.G. Wells's stories – depressing because Wells first presents a pessimistic vision of the future of

humanity in *The War of the Worlds* and then offers an eco-fascist vision of an earth cultivated to serve human interests in *Men Like Gods*. Michael Page illustrates the perennial struggle between evolutionary optimism and apocalyptic pessimism with the aid of Simak's *City* and Stewart's *Earth Abides*. Gib Prettyman explores the Taoist dimension in Ursula Le Guin's utopian fiction. Rob Latham concludes Part 1 with an examination of New Wave critiques of eco-imperialism in hard SF.

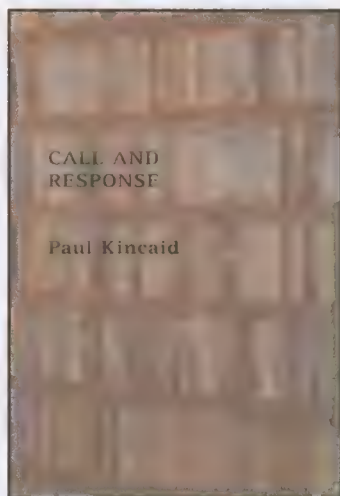
The second part, 'Brave New Worlds and Lands of the Flies', consists of five chapters focused on the dystopias corresponding to the utopias of Part 1. It begins with Sabine Höhler's study of Garrett Hardin's *Exploring New Ethics for Survival*, which is perhaps slightly off-topic as Hardin was an ethicist rather than a SF writer and this book was really an apologia for his right-wing ethical stance. This is followed by Andrew Milner looking at an Australian example of climatic apocalypse, Adeline Johns-Putra analysing Maggie Gee's *The Ice People*, and Elzette Steenkamp exploring ecological concerns in South African speculative fiction. Of these three chapters, I found Johns-Putra's the most thought-provoking in that it uses SF to challenge gendered understandings of caring in environmentalism. Part 2 concludes with Christopher Palmer looking at the effect of the ubiquity of apocalypse in recent literature.

Part 3, 'Quiet Earths, Junk Cities, and the Cultures of the Afternoon', is an attempt to explore the interstices between the utopias of Part 1 and their corresponding dystopias. Eric Otto looks at Paolo Bacigalupi's strategic use of dystopias to commend their opposite. Brent Bellamy and Imre Szeman offer a study of what they call science faction – recent speculative extrapolations from

current science to earthly life after the (near) extinction of the human race. Although such material is only tenuously connected with SF, I found this chapter the most thought-provoking in the book. Bellamy and Szeman demonstrate the inherent conservatism of these extrapolations: by highlighting the supposed ease with which the environment would recover after the end of the human race, the books they analyse present ecocatastrophe as a mere misstep, something that might be avoided by the appropriate technological fix. In Chapter 12, Timothy Morton uses *Avatar* as a peg on which to hang some rarefied thoughts on ecology and post-Enlightenment philosophy. To conclude the section, Melody Jue links Lem's *Solarius* and Greg Egan's 'Oceanic' to bring an ecological dimension to the surface/depth dichotomy in SF.

In addition to the essays that make up the bulk of the volume, there is an afterword in the form of a dialogue between Canavan and Robinson, which concludes on an upbeat note rejecting the charge of pessimism that is sometimes levelled at ecological SF. Last, but not least, Canavan has compiled a fairly comprehensive annotated reading list for anyone who wants to pursue ideas raised by the volume.

Given the multi-author nature of the work, it was inevitable that the quality of contributions would vary. There are some dull and uninteresting contributions. Indeed, one or two are little more than extended book reports. But those are more than compensated for by the chapters that throw up ideas you will want to develop in entirely different directions from those taken by the authors. In conclusion, the book certainly fills a gap in the market and offers an invaluable starting point upon which, hopefully, other scholars will build.



## CALL AND RESPONSE

Paul Kincaid

Becon Press pb, 391pp, £16

Paul Graham Raven

While introducing a section devoted to Christopher Priest (who else?), Paul Kincaid makes a claim which is a reliable marker that one is reading a critic rather than a reviewer: that writing a positive review is a far greater challenge than a negative one.

Kincaid is referring to his closeness to both Priest-the-man and Priest-the-author, to a familiarity with, and instinct for, the totality of an oeuvre which, counterintuitively, makes communicating one's conceptions of the work under consideration that much harder. In my own case, the challenge is not born of an excessive closeness to Kincaid's oeuvre (he's too damned prolific for me to keep up with, as the TOC of *Call and Response* amply demonstrates) so much as a more reflexive concern: how to praise the work of a fellow critic without it looking like said praise is rooted primarily in the similarity of our critical positions?

Kincaid and I appear to have both a text-level aesthetic and a generic ontology in common: we tend to like the same books for

similar reasons, and our conceptualisations of the ways in which genres are (self-)constructed have a considerable overlap (even though I mutter about modality where he fulminates on fuzziness; he'll come round eventually, I'm sure). But while it's very pleasant to find oneself in concord with a critic one admires and respects, there is a sense in which this is precisely the least valuable sort of criticism one can read. If there is a point to criticism beyond the simple commercial recommendation (or otherwise) of the review then it lies not in having one's *a priori* prejudices and preferences affirmed. On the contrary: the best criticism, the criticism that sticks with you, is the criticism that challenges your preconceptions, changes your thinking. As such, and perhaps paradoxically, Kincaid's is the wrong criticism for me to be reading; we attend the same church, you might say, and sometimes even harmonise from the same hymn-sheet.

So why, then, is *Call and Response* a valuable book, as well as a pleasurable one? It is this case to be made, the case for a less subjective sort of praise, that problematises the positive review: how to separate the ends from the means, the conclusions from the discussion. Or, to put it another way: how should one make the case for the value of the work to a hypothetical addressee who may not agree with its conclusions?

Fortunately for your not-so-humble interlocutor, Kincaid makes this easy, as it's a question he wrestles with constantly and earnestly, whether in the abstract (as in his introduction) or in the concrete (as in the reviews and essays which follow it); there is a dutiful current of reflexivity in Kincaid's writings, manifest in both the foregrounding of his personal and subjective relationships with particular books, oeuvres and

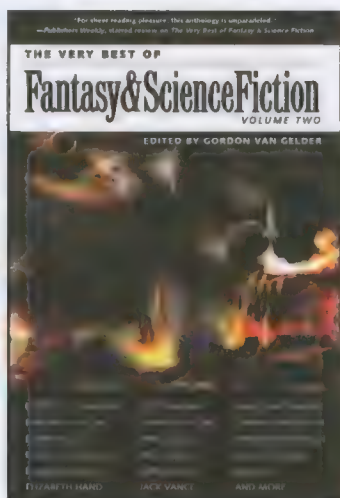
authors, and his unshowy considerations of his own positionalities. Shorn of anthropological verbiage, what this means is that we don't just see Kincaid's opinions, but the criteria upon which they were based; we get to observe and share in the process of their interrogation. We see how the sausage gets made, in other words.

What might seem surprising, at least at first, is that this transparency and rigour is the hallmark of a critic who has concluded that the purpose of criticism, "as both a reader and a critic, is to help me explore the books I read." Doesn't that sound solipsistic and selfish? Doesn't it sound like exactly the sort of ivory-tower attitude that "reviewers" so deplore in those with the lofty temerity to call themselves "critics"?

Of course it does – because it's a conclusion taken out of context. And that, to me, is the reviewer/critic dichotomy in a nutshell: the reviewer attempts, consciously or not, to isolate a text in a sort of literary laboratory where its qualities can be examined with a false sense of objectivity; while the critic knows, instinctively or otherwise, that literature is neither created, consumed or discussed in a cultural vacuum, and that the text without context is mostly a mirror in which we glimpse our own face and mistake it for the author's. Kincaid is an anthropologist of SF; he understands that all accounts are partial, all positions subjective, and that all authors – himself included! – walk the world with Barthes's bullet lodged in their chests. He thus achieves the nearest possible thing to objectivity, by merit of operating on the assumption that objectivity is unachievable.

The value of the work, then, lies in the exposure of the process. We read Kincaid not to be told what to think, but to be shown how we might decide for ourselves.





## THE VERY BEST OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION VOLUME TWO

edited by Gordon Van Gelder  
Tachyon Publications pb, 419pp, \$15.95

### Duncan Lunan

*The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* has been going since 1949 and has always aspired to print the “very best”, putting its emphasis on literary and artistic values. The first “best of” anthology appeared in 1952 and they continued yearly for the next twenty years, with a long succession of retrospectives and themed anthologies thereafter. Selecting the “very best” from all that, as Gordon Van Gelder did for the magazine’s sixtieth anniversary in 2009, had to be a tall order, and perhaps it was inevitable that he would be dissatisfied with it. After five more years, evidently the impulse to continue was irresistible.

The book needs little more justification for its existence – sixty-five years’ worth of top quality fiction could hardly be mined out in a single volume – but Michael Dirda goes further in his introduction, arguing the need for it to counter “presentism” in the new generation of readers for whom the genre is characterised

by film and TV productions. To someone of my age it might seem incredible that there are science fiction fans who’ve never heard of Alfred Bester’s *The Stars My Destination* (for example), much less read it, but it seems there’s a need to take their education in hand.

For old hands some of the stories here will be familiar, and some will be favourites. The former would almost certainly include ‘The Prize of Peril’ by Robert Sheckley, Heinlein’s ‘All You Zombies’, ‘The Anything Box’ by Zenna Henderson, ‘The Country of the Kind’ by Damon Knight and Harlan Ellison’s ‘Jeffy is Five’.

For me the latter include ‘The Narrow Valley’ by R.A. Lafferty, ‘The Third Level’ by Jack Finney, George Alec Effinger’s ‘The Aliens Who Knew, I Mean, *Everything*’, and ‘Maneki Neko’ by Bruce Sterling.

I read most if not all of them first in books, which illustrates how hard the magazines were to get back in those days, in Scotland. (The major distributor then was John Menzies, who seemed to believe that no-one wanted to read them outside the cities, and that nobody would buy them outside the main line railway stations.) But it also illustrates the extent to which the magazines were at the cutting edge of the field, with *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* always near the top of the range.

The stories here by C.M. Kornbluth, Brian Aldiss, Jack Vance, Kit Reed and Jane Yolen aren’t personal favourites of mine, but that’s explained by personal tastes and the names guarantee good writing.

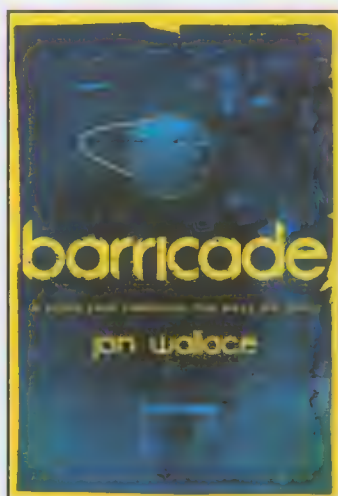
What’s harder to explain is that almost all the stories in the second half of the book seem unfamiliar, although they date from 1984 onwards and I was reading the

magazine regularly for most of the time.

Again the writers form a distinguished list, including Lucius Shepard, James Patrick Kelly, Gene Wolfe, Charles de Lint, Robert Reed, M. John Harrison, Geoff Ryman and Elizabeth Hand. It’s not just a Golden Age thing because the Effinger and Sterling stories which I like are from 1984 and 1998, and one of the best is Stephen King’s ‘*The New York Times* at Special Bargain Rates’, which dates from 2008. Nor (before anyone suggests it) is it because the Effinger story is the only one involving space travel, as witness the others above which I do like. Neither Van Gelder’s foreword nor Dirda’s introduction mention the fact and presumably it’s a coincidence, because one of Van Gelder’s earlier themed anthologies was of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* stories about Mars.

Nor can I put it down to a bias for science fiction rather than fantasy, because two of my four favourites above are fantasy – five counting the Stephen King, and personal taste definitely counts there because I’ve always preferred King’s short fiction to his novels. Seemingly he was editing *The Best American Short Stories* and decided to write one “just to see if he still had it. Sure seems that he does, no?”, which gets a “yes” as far as I’m concerned.

I suppose the unfamiliarity is just because I can’t remember every story in the six hundred or so issues of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* which I have read, and because I don’t share Van Gelder’s personal tastes all that closely. But it does have the advantage that I’ve been able to read many of these stories as if they were new to me, and to those for whom they really are new, they will serve as a good introduction to the magazine itself.



## BARRICADE

Jon Wallace

Gollancz pb, 256pp, £14.99

### Barbara Melville

In *Barricade*, our fleshy yet entirely artificial narrator Kenstibec shares a story of a road trip gone awry. He travels across a post-apocalyptic Britain, observing the disturbing aftermath of the war between the humans and the human made. The “Ficials” – genetically engineered life forms – are super strong and unfeeling, barricading themselves in cities and unleashing violence on their former human masters. Humans – or “Reals” – do their best to survive outside, indulging in tribalistic behaviours, and destroying Ficials wherever possible. With the help of an armoured car, Kenstibec’s mission is to transport fellow Ficial and journalist Starvie from Edinburgh to London, a journey threatened by all manner of unfathomable chaos.

So, at its heart, what is this book about? Perhaps it’s asking if one can still be human without emotions? Or perhaps it is exploring the line between mimicry and mastery? For me, these questions resonated the first few times authors asked them, but not now. *Barricade*



shares themes with *Super-Toys Last All Summer Long* by Brian Aldiss, *I, Robot* by Isaac Asimov and just about any recent action film involving AI and transhumanism. Of course, old ideas are fine to revisit but they need to be expertly spun. This doesn’t happen in *Barricade*, leaving me wondering if this book needed to be written. It has that unfortunate debut author quality of finding a new way of saying nothing new. Overall this book is poorly executed, amateurish and misanthropic.

There are the usual suspects: poor exposition and naff dialogue. Reams of clumsy over-description makes it read like a novella that’s been padded to fit an ambitious word count. Much of this padding is gross and pointless violence, including the sexual abuse of Starvie, a female “Pleasure Ficial” designed to be desirable. This brings me to my biggest complaint: her characterisation is hateful. She is vapid and irritatingly cinematic, like some Hollywood goddess who fights and fucks with néer a hair out of place. Several male characters – who I feel are also being massively short-changed – treat Starvie like a sex doll. Now one could argue that surely she is an object – she is a Ficial after all – and that this is a deliberate

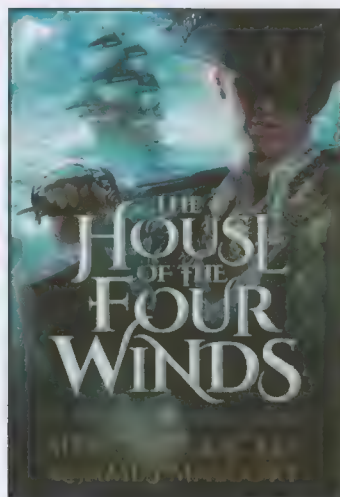
exploration of a devastating misogynistic world, rather than a symptom of a misogynistic book. However, this doesn’t sit right with me. Even if this was the intention, it’s still sickening to read, and there are no male Pleasure Ficials at all. Furthermore there are several descriptions like this one:

*“She lowered her head, then tossed it back in a cascade of curls, brushing at it with her fingertips, her face vacant, her lips pouting.”*

This is Kenstibec’s narration – the narration of an entirely asexual, emotionless being who makes several points of saying he just doesn’t get sexual attraction. So why-oh-why would he observe and then report on her cascading curls and pouting lips? This is one of many sexually charged comments on Starvie’s looks, in particular her hair, which by the end of the novel I wanted to incinerate. There is no indication he has mimicked or learned this language from somewhere else. In fact, the rest of his narration, while occasionally reflective, tends to bland and functional. So if it’s not coming from the narrator, it has to be authorial or editorial intrusion. That, for me, is a very scary thought.

This book is immature in both its ideas and execution. I kept being pulled out of the story to ask: what on earth is going on here? Why do I feel so slimy? I also feel rather sad, because in spite of my objections, I do believe Wallace can put one word in front of the other, and that Kenstibec had the makings of an interesting narrator. With a good rewrite and an edit, this book could have been so much more – at the very least a story well told, if not a masterly thought experiment. But alas, I can’t change what has already happened. So while I’m not sure I look forward to Wallace’s next book, I am certainly very curious. I suppose, in all likelihood, it couldn’t really get any worse.





## THE HOUSE OF THE FOUR WINDS

Mercedes Lackey & James Mallory

Tor hb, 304pp, \$24.99

**Ian Hunter**

Not to be confused with the John Buchan book of the same name that featured – I kid you not – a retired grocer as its hero, this *The House of the Four Winds* is by Mercedes Lackey and James Mallory and is ‘Book One of One Dozen Daughters’. Expect another eleven titles to follow, and maybe even the dreaded book thirteen, which wraps everything up. The prolific Lackey is possibly better known as the creator of The Valdemar Universe and its many trilogies, odd quintet and sometimes stand-alone novel that comprise it. There is also her SERRATED Edge series. She’s better known to me for the Diane Tregarde trilogy of the early 1990s that chronicled the occult adventures of witch Tregarde and was probably slightly before its time and suffered accordingly in terms of sales compared to the recent and current market which is saturated with all sorts of heroines (alive and dead and sometimes in between) who walk the dark side. As mentioned, Lackey is very prolific,

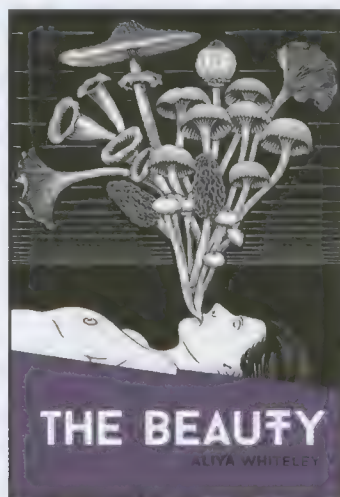
which is an understatement, as, apart from short story collections and contributions to anthologies, my reckoning is that she has written (so far) 120 novels – although several series have been in partnership with other writers, most notably her husband Larry Dixon, as well as many leading female writers including Holly Lisle, Ellen Guon, C.J. Cherryh, Anne McCaffrey, Andre Norton and Marion Zimmer Bradley. Not surprisingly, she has some previous with Mallory, writing the Obsidian trilogy, the Enduring Flame trilogy, and the first two novels of The Dragon Prophecy trilogy with him.

Which brings us to *The House of the Four Winds*, a twelve-chapter novel that starts with a three-page scene-setting prologue entitled ‘The Parliament of Cats’, which is direct, straightforward and almost fairytale-like in its delivery. It tells us of the circumstances surrounding the Royal Family of the Duchy of Swansgaarde, which lies in a valley in the Borogny and borders on Turkey, Poland and the mighty Russian Empire, as well as the possibly even mightier Cisleithanian Empire; a precarious place to be for such a tiny state. Matters are not helped by the fact that Duke Rupert and Duchess Yetive have produced twelve daughters and then, unexpectedly, one son who, according to the laws of inheritance, will take the throne. It’s all very well for number one son, but what to do about all these princesses, and do you really want twelve daughters stomping around the castle or hidden in their chambers with the court musicians turned up to eleven? Fortunately the Duke and Duchess have had the foresight to allow their daughters, since the age of ten, to choose whatever “trade” they wanted to study. Princess Clarice Eugenie Victoria Amalthea Meulsine, the eldest of the daughters, and soon to turn eighteen, picked the sword

as her trade. Now, after a family gathering, it has been decided that each princess, when they reach the age of eighteen, will go forth into the world and seek their fortune and Clarice, as the eldest, gets to go first on this grand adventure to make a new life for herself.

It’s a shame then that, with such a conceit and series set-up, this first book doesn’t exactly set the heather on fire. It reads like a Shakespearean cross-dressing romance meets *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Thanks to a special corset, Clarice disguises herself as a man – Clarence Swann – with the intention of working her passage on the *Asesino* which is sailing for the New World. Things are complicated by her burgeoning bromance with ship’s navigator Dominick, and further complicated when he leads a mutiny against the cruel Captain Sprunt. After Sprunt’s death, the crew are now branded as outlaws and pirates and have no choice but to head for the secret pirate haven known as the House of the Four Winds. Then the fun starts in a tale that involves ghosts ships, sea monsters and magic, with Clarice quickly going from a wide-eyed innocent to someone who views everything and everyone through narrowed eyes in a fast-moving, light-hearted romp – apart from the odd flogging, that is.

Given that the Duchy has another eleven daughters still to seek their fame and fortune, it will be interesting to see what other occupations and adventures they embrace. Unlike the young ladies who populate Jane Austen novels with accomplishments such as singing, playing the piano, embroidery and going for long walks, I imagine greater things await these princesses depending on the trades they have adopted. However, I suspect the only way I will find out about them in future is by reading the announcements posted on the castle gates.



### THE BEAUTY

Aliya Whiteley

Unsung Stories pb, 100pp, £9.99

#### Stephen Theaker

*The Beauty* is a story told by Nathan. Telling stories has been his job ever since the women and girls first began to fall sick and he stood up at the commune's campfire and retold the story of a famous boy wizard to keep away the silence of the night. It has now been six years since the last women in the valley died, all of them victims of an aggressive fungal infection. The future is bleak, but he tells the surviving men and teenage boys tales of the past, doing his best to keep the women alive, in their thoughts at least. For sex and love the younger men make do with each other. That brings comfort, but there's no future in it for the species, and no hope, even for a community that was self-sufficient before the disaster.

That is, until Nathan's encounter in the woods with what he calls the Beauty, a being very like a woman in some ways, disturbingly different in others: "It has breasts, globes of yellow, and rounded hips that speak to me of woman, of want, and that disgusts me

beyond words." His return to the commune with his Beauty, and a crowd of others like it, changes everything, and those changes are not welcomed by all. But he finds an unexpected ally in his Uncle Ted, who till now had lived out in the woods, up to who knows what, and the teenagers are very enthusiastic about the new situation: they "wear skirts, and cite the ease of joining with their Beauties – no more zips to undo, simply lift the material!"

This is a short book with a lot to say, all of it interesting. About what people are prepared to do in order to survive, and how far others will go to prevent change; or, if we step back from Nathan's point of view, a book about collaborators, and how collaboration can corrupt and degrade. On another level it's about how men are affected by the absence of women, and later how they might react to losing their ill-earned place as the dominant gender: some with relief, others with murderous rage. Or it could be taken as an interrogation of that male fantasy, the all-sex all-time relationship, the always-available partner; it suggests how quickly life with a sexbot (or here, a sex mushroom) might lose its shine. Though it's not quite a horror novella, its awful transformations of the flesh would do David Cronenberg proud.

Most of all it's about the power of storytelling to preserve our past and shape our future, and so one can see why it would appeal to an imprint called *Unsung Stories*; on this evidence a name to look out for. *The Beauty* is intellectual and visceral, frightening and thoughtful, an adventure and a meditation. Letting my copy of Whiteley's *Mean Mode Median* go unread for so long has clearly been a huge mistake.

[www.unsungstories.co.uk](http://www.unsungstories.co.uk)



### THE COLLAPSE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Naomi Oreskes & Erik M. Conway

Columbia University Press pb, 104pp, \$9.95

#### Paul Graham Raven

Frederic Jameson is often quoted as saying that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism; the popularity of predominantly dystopian narratives of futurity – whether delivered as multiplex blockbusters or economic forecasts – would seem to bear him out. But the sfnal dystopian tradition has long had a cautionary and critical backbone to it, with the implication being that a grim future more fully explored might be more easily avoided; Huxley, Wells and Orwell all depicted dystopias for rhetorical purposes, and "if this carries on..." has been implicit in the standard plot engine ever since. The endurance of classic dystopias as touchstones suggests there is considerable power in presenting a worst-case scenario as a *fait accompli*; the techniques of narrative can bring disaster to life, make consequences feel more concrete than the mere recounting of facts.

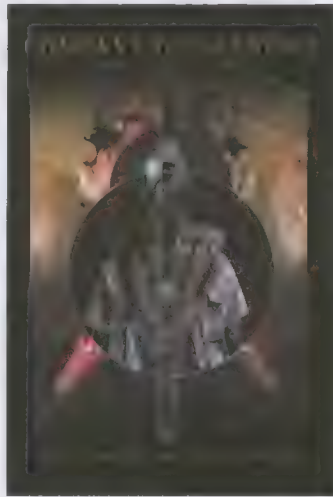
I feel safe in presuming that a similar conclusion prompted Oreskes and Conway, two science



historians, to write *The Collapse of Western Civilization*. Purportedly originating in “the Second People’s Republic of China” and published “on the 300th anniversary of the Great Collapse”, the text takes the form of a fairly dry academic précis of the socioeconomic and ideological drivers that led to the titular Great Collapse of 2093. A thrilling page-turner it ain’t – the narrator effaces themselves from the text in the grand academic tradition, and settles for simply recounting the choices which led to our inexorable run-in with global ecological market-failure. You know the culprits already: neoliberalism’s contradictory obsession with free markets and deregulation; logical positivism and the epistemological hubris of technoscience; the economic dogma of competition, growth and progress; a money- and blood-soaked century of path-dependency politics and infrastructural lock-in. There’s no McGuffin needed for this denouement, no jonbar point on which our fates might pivot – merely business as usual.

Dystopias of ecological collapse aren’t rare, though few are so rigorously researched as this one. But therein lies the rub: with its dry style, *The Collapse of Western Civilization* is unlikely to reach a popular audience who prefer their dystopias to thrill at least as much as they scare. And that’s a shame, because it sneakily does something sorely lacking in the environmental discourse: it depicts drastic climate change as something which, given the appropriate social and political will, might be recoverable from in the long run.

That a post-capitalist China should play poster-child for that recovery is no mere ironic device, either. It may be harder to imagine the end of capitalism than the end of the world, but happy endings have always been the hardest to write convincingly.



### COMPANY OF SHADOWS

**Paul Gerrard**

Paul Gerrard Publishing hb, 135pp, £29.99

**Simon Marshall-Jones**

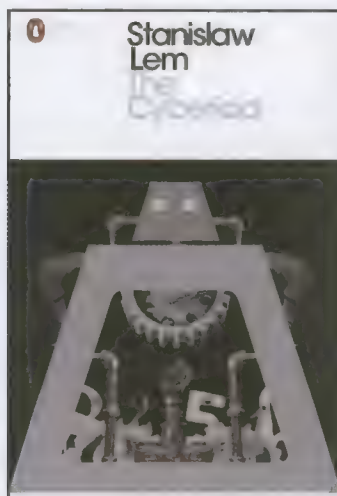
During the latter part of the seventies and the early eighties there was something of a vogue for SF and fantasy-based artbooks, made particularly famous by the imprint Dragon’s Dream, who showcased works from the likes of Roger Dean, Chris Foss, and Patrick Woodroffe. They were avidly collected by many, opening up the realms beyond in bright technicolour realism, perhaps replacing the drab reality of that era with a dream of better lives and more colourful worlds.

It was also around this time that the late H.R. Giger had made a seismic impression on SF, particularly in the cinematic field, when he was asked to design the iconic Xenomorph in Ridley Scott’s *Alien*, a creature so startlingly original in conception and execution that the artist was immediately thrust into the media spotlight. Such was Giger’s impact that there have been numerous imitators spilling out of the decaying corners of rusting machinery around the world ever since. Most are abysmal and shameless copies

but, just occasionally, there comes along an artist who takes the *spirit* and *intention* of what Giger set out to nail to his canvases, and mixes it with his/her own blighted vision. One such is Paul Gerrard, a film/TV concept artist who attempts (and manages) to transcend both the SF and horror genres, resulting in some gleefully insane amalgamations that are at once repulsive and yet strangely intriguing, attractive even. Monochrome hues clash with technicolour brightness, encapsulating a nightmarish inversion of all that is safe and right. Furthermore, as well as the Giger influence, one can detect a vein of melting Baconesque surrealism, along with hints of Ernst and perhaps Dali.

Pascal Barre’s introduction says of Gerrard’s works that they “may seem ... separated from nature, but are of nature, possessing positive and negative, good and evil characteristics.” This is as succinct as any definition of the images contained herein, but one could go further in stating that this nature has been fuelled by a nuclear imagination, where mutation and evolution have collaborated in some unholy magical rituals and subversion of science. The genetic perversions resulting from these ceremonies are what are depicted here, which Gerrard refers to as ‘The Shadow Cast’. They inhabit a world which has long since passed into darkness – and the way in which they’ve been rendered implies that maybe these are his front-line reports.

As well as his personal work (accompanied by stories and details), the book showcases his creature-concept work for Jonathan Liebesman’s *Wrath of the Titans*, plus sketches and behind-the-scenes photographs of his own obsession, *Hellraiser: Origins*. For anyone longing to be a witness to a vision going beyond the norm, this is a good place to start.



### THE CYBERIAD

**Stanislaw Lem**

Penguin Modern Classics pb, 290pp, £9.99

**Andy Hedgecock**

Thirty years ago I was a post-graduate student struggling with the philosophical background to Simulation and Modelling. I'd been told the thought experiments of Raymond Smullyan and Douglas Hofstadter were an accessible starting point, but these weren't much fun: contrived fictions without a heart – arid, unconvincing and emotionless renderings of 'problem themes' into story formats. Then the cavalry arrived: "If you want to understand the philosophical implications of simulation," said my supervisor, "you need to read Borges, and Lem." I'd already dipped my toes into the metafictional paradoxes of Borges but I'm ashamed to admit that I knew nothing about the Polish SF writer Stanislaw Lem in the autumn of 1984. At that stage I wasn't even acquainted with Andrei Tarkovsky's film version of *Solaris*.

Fortunately, Brunel University Library located a copy of the 1975 edition of *The Cyberiad*. It was a revelation: not only because Lem augmented my understanding of the risks and dilemmas of artificial

intelligence, but because here was a writer who used an unfamiliar, disconcerting and hugely entertaining set of literary forms to tackle morality, politics and the collision of cognition and consciousness. Far more sophisticated and resonant than Smullyan and Hofstadter, Lem's fiction is a kissing cousin of magic realism but there are hints of experimental SF, informal anecdotes and traditional Central European folk tales. Imagine a collaboration between the Brothers Grimm and John Sladek and you'll be thinking along the right lines.

This new edition of *The Cyberiad* provides a welcome reminder of what I've enjoyed about Lem's work. If the stories belong to any subgenre, it's faux-medieval futurism: there are kings, knights, princesses, and intelligent robots with the ability to create conscious machines of their own. The bulk of the tales relate the adventures of two meta-robots, Trurl and Klapaucius, with the apparent capacity to engineer a limitless range of conscious and unconscious machines and entities. These 'constructors' are essentially well-meaning but compete in the application of their technological abilities, sometimes with unexpectedly complex and regrettable outcomes. Much of the humour is derived from situations in which technique outstrips wisdom. Several of the stories involve the constructors' ongoing quest to achieve the HPLD civilisation: the Highest Possible Level of Development. It is in the failure of the constructors' magnificent and idealistic designs that Lem's sureness of touch in melding morality, invention and exuberant tragicomedy is most apparent.

The most complex tale, at least in terms of structure, is 'Tale of the Three Storytelling Machines of King Genius'. This Chinese-box of stories offers an insight into the bleak, bizarre and transcendent

nature of existence as anything by Pinter or Pirandello.

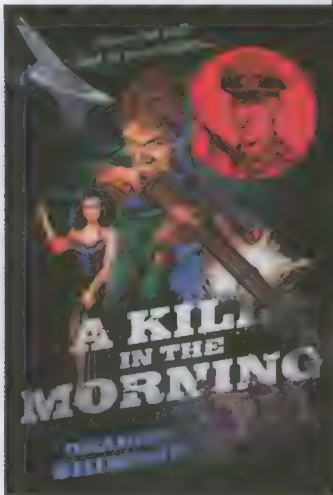
Christopher Priest's sharp and informative introduction highlights what is unique about Lem's work. It also places Lem in a tradition and considers his work against the backdrop of the upheavals of life in twentieth century Poland – the censorship, suspicion of non-realist art in Warsaw Pact countries, and suspicion of Eastern European writers in America. Particularly those who outsold American SF writers. It gives a fascinating flash of the connection between Lem's life and the work and leaves you wanting to know more.

It takes a talented artist with an idiosyncratic vision to illustrate the comic or the fantastic. John Tenniel's images complemented Lewis Carroll's words brilliantly, of course, and Boswell, Hoffmann and Searle did a damn fine job on *The Exploits of Engelbrecht*: Daniel Mróz deserves to join this pantheon. There's a risk of diminishing the written weird by instantiating it in images, but Mróz's economic and elegant black and white graphics (clearly reproduced by Penguin) add another dimension to Lem's lavish imaginings.

Finally, it should be noted that Michael Kandel's excellent translation (retained from the original UK/US publications) is vital to the accessibility and success of Lem's tales in English. The crisp, restrained style of *Lem-Plus-Kandel*, an engineered consciousness to rival the creations of Trurl and Klapaucius, is the perfect vehicle for the ebullience of the author's dry wit and baroque invention.

This is an excellent edition of a fine collection that has not merely stood the test of time but has, if anything, grown in stature as the language of simulation and cybernetics has taken a grip on the cultural mainstream. Go on, treat yourself.





### A KILL IN THE MORNING

Graeme Shimmin

Bantam Press pb, 384pp, £12.99

#### Ian Sales

It is 1955. World War II ended in 1941 when Britain signed a peace treaty with Rudolf Hess, and now the Nazis control Europe... If there are two well-populated, perhaps even over-populated, worlds in our alternate histories, it's Hitler victorious and the South winning the American Civil War. So any novel settling in either of those lands needs to be special if it's to stand above the competition. Shimmin's approach is to throw Ian Fleming and Nazi occult science into the pot.

At first glance, James Bond and a Nazi-controlled Europe feels like a good fit – just swap in the Germans for the Russians, and the Cold War remains essentially unchanged (although, interestingly, it would make the British ideologically and politically closer to the “enemy” than was the case in the real world). But doing so does seem somewhat pointless – such an easy alteration begs the question, why bother doing it? Which is where the Nazi occult science plays a part. In the seventy years since the end of World War



II an entire mythology has grown up around the fringe science the desperate Germans allegedly turned to in the latter days of the war – flying saucers, Feuerball missiles, secret bases in the Antarctic, atomic bombs, Repulsine engines, the Bell... Not to mention the actual documented stuff they *did* do, like the V-1, V-2, Natter, Me 163, all the aerodynamic work on delta platforms and flying wings by Horten and Lippisch...

*A Kill in the Morning* opens with the unnamed narrator – though presented like Harry Palmer, he is very much modelled on James Bond – assisting with the destruction of a death camp, and the rescue of some of its inmates. But not all of them. In fact, there's a curious lack of affect, a blithe callousness to the lives of people, throughout this book. So far, so humdrum.

And then a Fairey Rotodyne flies out of the night sky to pick up the protagonist and the released prisoners.

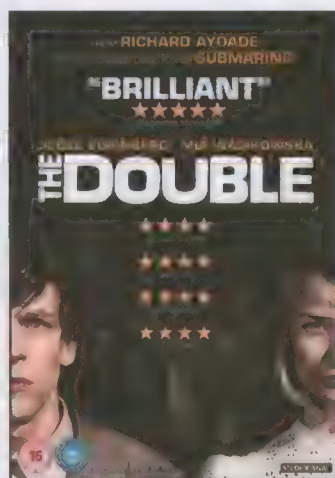
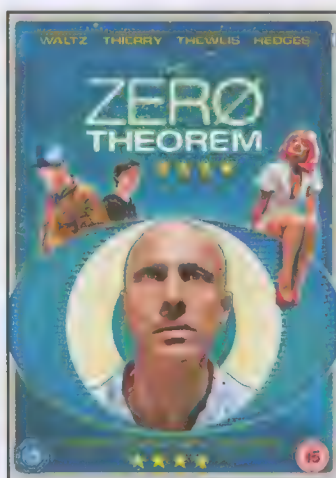
However, rather than signal an interesting use of Cold War technology, the Rotodyne is merely evidence of Shimmin's haphazard approach to world-building, which features several jets that could not possibly have been flying in 1955 (and are even less likely to have existed if World War II ended in 1941). Even more bizarrely, the Rotodyne is operated by the Royal Israeli Air Force. Because Israel is a British overseas possession.

If Shimmin's alternate twentieth century is somewhat peculiar, his story is built from all too familiar patterns. The Nazis are

evil, the Israelis are good, the Arabs are bad, the British upper classes are perfidious, the women are beautiful... It's not so much that Shimmin writes in broad brush-strokes, but that he draws everything in cartoon colours. Take those women: every time a woman appears in the narrative, we're treated to a description of her appearance and clothing. Not so for the men. The women are also referred to in the prose by their first names, the men by their surnames. It's the twenty-first century – we should be doing better than this everyday sexism in our fictions.

The plot somewhat redeems these flaws. When the Old Man of the British secret service is assassinated, the unnamed protagonist is prompted to seek revenge on SS Reichsführer Heydrich, and so he inadvertently learns of the existence of a secret cabal of British aristocrats who have reached an accommodation with the Nazis, along with Heydrich's own completely out-of-left-field plan to use the Bell to travel back in time to ensure global Nazi domination. This latter leads to the climax of the novel, and it's pure hokum, on a par with the ending of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; a finale better suited to Cubby Broccoli's James Bond than it is Ian Fleming's.

Shimmin's decision to write his novel in first-person present tense, and to keep his protagonist anonymous throughout, can't disguise the fact that *A Kill in the Morning* is pure commercial fiction. It's a fast read and, despite a number of interesting pieces of alternate history furniture, it manages to make use of every cliché associated both with the National Socialists and alternate history. Read as adventure fiction, it's an enjoyable enough romp, albeit about thirty years out of date in its sensibilities.



## LASER FODDER TONY LEE

AFTER THE DARK

THE ZERO THEOREM

THE DOUBLE

DIVERGENT

LAST DAYS ON MARS

THE CHANGES

THE BOY FROM SPACE

MINDSCAPE

TRANSCENDENCE

ASHENS AND THE QUEST  
FOR THE GAMECHILD

RPG - REAL PLAYING GAME

HK: FORBIDDEN  
SUPERHERO

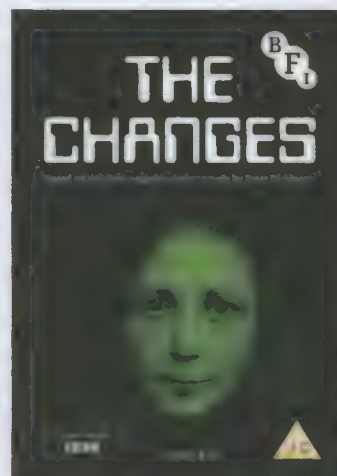
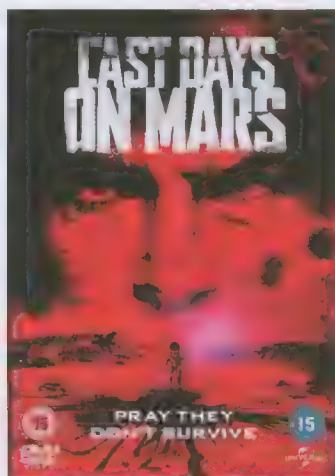
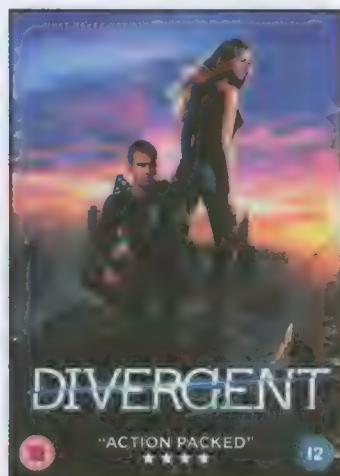


I'm A Published Poet...Get Me Out Of Here! **AFTER THE DARK** (DVD, 21 July) by John Huddles is a philosophy class struggle about who deserves a place in the bunker to survive a nuclear apocalypse. It's a thought-experiment series presented as drama-doc. Set in a Jakarta school for international students, where instructor Zimit (British export James D'Arcy, *Cloud Atlas*, Anthony Perkins in *Hitchcock*) challenges his new graduates to confront gene-pool variables and cultural/societal prejudices in divisive scenarios that pit logic against emotion.

Never mind the thorny ethical concerns of testing kids on life-and-death issues before their brains have fully matured, this is a somewhat lackadaisical sci-fi fantasy that starts promisingly enough, but then it loses any focus on intellectual discussions and dissolves into what amounts to a string of theoretical teeny-romantic episodes. It demots the genre reach of a scissor-lift or a cherry-picker but not a rocket launch. *ATD* explores sundry moral dilemmas, and questions the survivalist mindset, but elements like the recurring black-comedy skit about the uselessness of poetry in post-holocaust worlds, and the pressures of existing relationships between students, undermine any potential suspense and the group tensions of each supposedly enlightening situation.

Huddles' movie is rarely less than watchable, but too often it feels like a game scenario and an SF stageplay have been roughly shoehorned into a screenplay format; one that works on-screen, crudely, only because of the visual impact of its CGI work.





What is the meaning of life? Monty Python's already-familiar pursuit of the ultimate knowledge receives a fresh perspective in Terry Gilliam's **THE ZERO THEOREM** (DVD/Blu-ray, 21 July), a sublime tragedy of disillusionment while staying at home.

Qohen (Christoph Waltz, Richelieu in Anderson's *Three Musketeers* remake) is a hacker set on the trail of cyber entities, while striving to solve equations in virtuality that should provide Management (Matt Damon, in some amusingly weird camouflage suits) with illuminating answers to definitive questions about humanity's place in the universe. However, our bald, reclusive hero lives in a disused church, and is troubled by nagging beliefs as he waits for an important and long overdue call. What a fool he is...expecting enlightenment

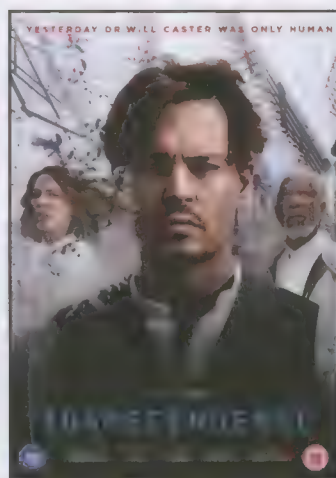
via his telephone, while employed to work on high-level number-crunching.

Gilliam finds exactly the right balance of uneasy comedy (David Thewlis makes a terrific job supervisor) and heartbreak in this future of corporate brainwashing and philosophical ennui, where colourful street furniture masks cod-Orwellian commerce. The fearlessly optimistic Qohen meets his match in a femme fatale, Bainsley (Mélanie Thierry, *Babylon A.D.*), who is not simply the distracting sexpot that she first appears in frolics on a VR beach where the Sun never sets. She might offer salvation for finally despondent Q, if he chooses to emerge from a denial-of-hiding in his secret head-trip. Tilda Swinton is good fun as Q's unhelpful interactive Dr Shrink program: "I couldn't help but notice this young lady's pathological attempt to project upon you her daddy issues of abandonment."

In the end, *TZT* winds down into a morbid whimsy, typical of Gilliam's artistic leanings, but at least it steers away from a poetic descent into the galactic-doomsday black hole. Despite everything, the grace note is one of renewed hope, not oblivion.

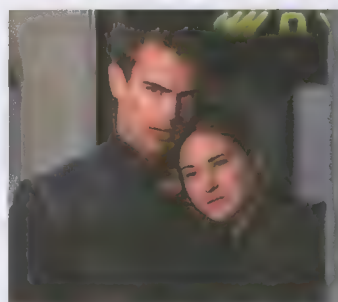


"Put him down as a 'maybe.'" Richard Ayoade conjures up some fabulous imagery for **THE DOUBLE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 4 August), a black-comedy updating of Dostoevsky's 150-year-old novella. In a dingy, spooky otherworld, office worker Simon (rising star Jesse Eisenberg, *Zombieland*, *Social Network*, *Now You See Me*, and soon-to-be Lex Luthor in *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice*) acquires a doppelganger – James – after witnessing a suicidal jumper. Although introverted Simon can only spy on and clumsily approach neighbour Hannah (Mia Wasikowska, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Only Lovers Left Alive*), manipulative extrovert James finds usurping poor Simon's entire life an easy game of charismatic one-upmanship and mischievous karma.



With a photocopying leitmotif in this clerical/business universe of disposable non-people, the identity crisis prompted by nice simple Simon's alter-ego-plus plays like an inspired Kafkaesque version of *Shatterday*, while the shifting mood and time-warped identikit-period trappings are a designer tribute to Gilliam's evocative *Brazil*.

Eisenberg does well in his dual role, while duelling verbally with his escalating fetch ("I'd like to think I'm pretty unique." We all would!), and the varied supporting cast – including veteran Wallace Shawn – bring plenty of balancing joviality to what might have been a suffocatingly bleak outlook. In the end, as its genre themes solidify from the nightmarish despair of quantum paradox into homicidal reality, and the amusing oddities evaporate into strong-measurement finality, this is a psychological thriller of a captivating style over familiar rom-com content. Thankfully it's not too predictable, but *The Double's* drama of oppositional personality and body-snatcher takeover has a lurking sense that Ayode is a haunted director who is still struggling to fully outgrow his creative influences.



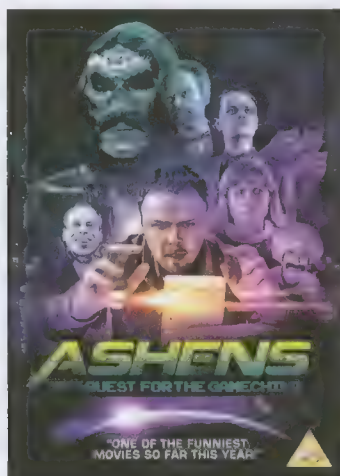
With its fenced-in and stratified post-WW3 society in Chicago, **DIVERGENT** (DVD/Blu-ray, 11 August) presents a teen fantasy of quasi-dystopia; a retroactive brave new world where citizen graduate Beatrice chooses to join the faction of action instead of her parents' caregiver bloc. The first rule of fight club is: rules change. Poor re-named Tris finds that being Dauntless is thankless, and not a glamour profession. Like some kind of social polymath, our heroine has no trouble adapting to psych-out 101 testing, but her boyfriend/trainer and her classmates begin to suspect Tris of being different, and that's not allowed.

As if re-combining DNA themes sampled from his previous genre movies – *The Illusionist* and *Limitless* – director Neil Burger tackles plot elements of romantic

social climbing and eclectic individuality versus artificially-maintained conformity, for sci-fi drama about diversity that demonstrates the usefulness of anarchic thinking, without too-eagerly suggesting that outlaw behaviour is necessary. *Divergent* clearly attempts to bridge the demographic gap between *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games*. But, as it's a formulaic thriller where arguments are settled with guns, and the production meets the requirements as a typical franchise starter (casting Kate Winslet fulfils the criteria for a British villain), there's much bitter irony in the movie's lack of any high ground – as political commentary or genre satire. *Divergent* is no more or less torturously silly, as SF, than that *Hunger Games* malarkey, but it remains horribly sad that the best, if perhaps not the only, way to ensure a modicum of success for an origin story of young and restless rebels against the new orthodoxy has an utterly conventional approach to storytelling and morality that amounts to following a tired, trite Hollywood template.

A sequel, *Insurgent*, directed by Robert Schwentke, is due out in March 2015.





The feature-debut of filmmaker Ruairi Robinson, **LAST DAYS ON MARS** (Blu-ray/DVD, 18 August) suggests that finding fossilised bacteria on the red planet could not/would not provide sufficient entertainment value for any sci-fi drama. This is a movie that respects only a hyperbolic degree of conflict. It is a basic hack of *Alien* DNA with John Carpenter's *Ghosts of Mars* spliced into its helix for a Martian zombies horror.

Captain Brunel (Elias Koteas) leads the Aurora mission – an international crew of explorers/sample-gatherers ranging from Tantalus base, to discover what is under the ground on Mars. When a microbial life-form infects the least cautious astronauts, Canadian Brunel's command dissolves with his rapid mutation in the labs, and a loss of humanity becomes the principal focus of this too-earnest drama's version of cross-genre clichés (such as *The Incredible Melting Man*, 1977).

Despite the astute casting of Briton Olivia Williams as nominal heroine Kim, in a Ripleyesque role, it's Liev Schreiber's American hero Campbell who's destined to be the last man standing for a desperate escape from the surface. Oddly, this movie (co-produced by the BFI with some Irish funding) of undead violence on a world of blood and dust is based on a rather obscure short story, 'The Animators' (1975) by Sydney J. Bounds. Although nightfall on Mars helps to generate a palpable atmosphere of dread in the hellish darkness of dust-storms and habitat power-failures, this UK production rejects the hard-SF affect of *Gravity*, opting for overly-emotional scenes that damage the potential for character-based intrigues of what might have been another neat little genre mystery to rival Duncan Jones' cult favourite *Moon*.

Still, I should not quibble. It's great to see a homegrown science fiction/horror that is based on an existing (albeit old and forgotten) story instead of just another (*Star Wars*/*Trek*) remake or sequel, wasting enormous budgetary resources on trite action sequences and uselessly revamped 1960s–1970s genre icons. Many more adaptations of SF literature – such as Banks' *Culture* and Asher's *Polity* – are required urgently for a new space-opera boom, so it's well worth supporting such efforts as *LDOM* (despite its flaws and overbearing hysterical tone) to show Hollywood's bigwigs what's really welcome. There are thousands of short stories and hundreds of novels to choose from so a radical change of source material for new SF cinema is long overdue. Why are we still waiting?



Made in 1975, TV series **THE CHANGES** (DVD, 25 August) posits a crackle 'n' buzz apocalypse that prompts mass-hysterical vandalism (of a Luddite variety) in episodic revolt against machines. In the social collapse that follows, schoolgirl heroine Nicky is home alone, but she decides not to stay and wait for her missing parents. After all the domestic gadgets and public utilities are scrapped, nothing works, and the doomsday clock sub reads 12:15 to mark the fragility of civilisation dependent upon technology. This very British drama wears its Wyndhamesque fashions well, with cider instead of tea as the cosy catastrophe's beverage of choice. Curious oddities in the urban crash: why smash bicycles, but not prams and carts?

Predating Terry Nation's *Survivors* by a few months, this BBC kids' show turns a refugee caravan into a jolly adventure trek. Typical of its TV era, middle-class values abound, but many

villagers' attitudes harden against outsiders. Indian stereotypes do present a sympathetic face/force for good, with their simpler ways and national dress traditions. Although well-intentioned, they are suspiciously unaffected by the strange, brain-scrambling noises that come from an ancient magical source.

One of the worst despotic villains that Nicky confronts is a robber/kidnapper ("Do you think they will actually burn the children?" Gosh!), involuntarily supported by traders emerging from the rural shambles of broken communities where she finds refuge. Bad guys are tackled by sword-fighting Sikhs; faithful heroes not alienated by racism. Those hostage boys and girls are rescued unharmed, of course. On her way to the Cotswolds, Nicky

meets sheepish farmer Peter (Jack Watson – most recognisable face in this cast), a reluctant helper of witch-hunters happily adopting superstitious nonsense, and this segues into a bucolic soap opera interlude before the story shifts back towards proper genre concerns for climactic discoveries (cue scrambling about in a quarry) related to the mythic sorcery of Merlin. A cheerful ending ensues. This two-disc set of ten 25-minute episodes has been re-mastered from its original source to produce a respectable if not quite stunning release from the film archive materials.

Another BFI release is **THE BOY FROM SPACE** (DVD, 25 August), made in 1971. This TV series is a kind of junior *UFO*, with adventurers Dan and Helen meeting young alien Peep-peep

(who struggles to communicate in his 'radiophonic' language), and various encounters with a menacing 'Thin Man' who's obviously not from around here. There's a feature-length (70 minutes) edit on disc two of this restoration release and that's worth seeing. Much less interesting, the main presentation – a 1980 version with wraparound commentary of the 'Look and Read' educational type – can be viewed as campily amusing despite the best efforts of pedantic reader Wordy and *Blue Peter*-ish astronaut Cosmo to provide spelling checklists and explain grammar via cartoons. Annoying interruptions spoil the fun as, buried in their genre-stifling antics, Richard Carpenter's original drama struggles to exist as a half-decent kids' sci-fi that it clearly is – but only if you see the movie cut.



Cinematographer on the *Dark Knight* trilogy, Wally Pfister earns his directorial debut with **TRANSCENDENCE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 25 August), a fascinating mystery starring Johnny Depp as Will Caster, the first man in cyberspace. If the main character's name is a blatant pun on the movie's uploaded-consciousness plot, then the drama ought to be a work of higher grade SF to make up for such a jokey conceit.

From white-board scrawls to over-mind menace and beyond, this is a techno-thriller and epic tragedy centred on fairly typical singularity themes. While our fatally poisoned hero's copied

mentality stumbles towards godhood opposed by neo-Luddite terrorism, there seems no doubt about whose side SF fans should be on. At first, even the genius' wife Evelyn (Rebecca Hall, *The Awakening*, *Iron Man 3*) is not persuaded by any impassioned arguments for slower development, and the opposition's violence only strengthens her resolve to engineer a proverbial ghost in the big online machine.

The baddies, led by Bree (Kate Mara), stir the doomsayer's pot of hot paranoia without realising there is no logic spoon. Two years later, but before you can even say "open the pod bay doors," a virtual son-of-Will is advancing rapidly through his post-humanity phases. Forbin's mighty Colossus of dictatorship and the rogue shadows of *Demon Seed*'s pragmatically-evil Proteus lurk as genre spectres while the iWill prog's building a cyborg army (cue bionic stunts!), primed

for networking by their nanotech implants.

Skynet angst sways the judgements, almost invalidating conventional scientific wisdom. Do people fear what they don't understand, or are they simply rejecting what cannot be controlled? Is the question here about avoiding involuntary but practically benevolent 'uplift' and/or potential-immortality scenarios at any cost? Can the plans of an autonomous messiah be trusted? Why does social regression to steam-funk-city seem preferable to living with the challenges of an omniscient clone? These and other puzzlers are considered by *Transcendence*, without actually providing any answers or reaching persuasively ethical conclusions.

So, there is nothing new under this big movie's sci-firmament of crypto-variant nihilism, and yet its romantic heart beats on long after the life-support machinery has been unplugged.





In *Dreamscape* (1984), finding real-world solutions to an American president's WW3 nightmares were at stake. But in Spanish director Jorge Dorado's debut feature (and first English movie) *Anna*, re-titled **MINDSCAPE** for its DVD release (25 August), there is little more than a disturbed teenager at risk.

In this understated futuristic drama about techno-shrinks, John (Mark Strong, 'Sinestro' in *Green Lantern*) is a therapist tasked with convincing an apparently crazy heiress, Anna (Taissa Farmiga, *American Horror Story*), to give up her hunger strike. With competing claims to her inheritance fortune hanging in the balance, John delves into Anna's childhood. But, just as unfussy psi-gadgetry enables John's monitoring of her memory replays, so Anna manages to dredge up his haunted past, too. Suspicions of parental abuse and hints of systematic paedophilia attempt to award this psycho-thriller with a much harder edge than first anticipated – although it boasts more style than dramatic substance.

Farmiga is good value as the overly intense heroine and there's one clever twist in this tale of headspace as routinely accessible media. However, like anything that is connected to our remembrances, the lack of a trustworthy narrator spoils the modest revelations and, unfortunately, results in a vapid and flimsy effort overall.

## KIPPLEZONE: ALSO RECEIVED



Humour is not universal. Genre comedy is a particularly difficult sector to do well in, at least with any widespread appeal. For every popular sci-fi parody there's a dustbin full of unsuccessful spoofs. Claiming that such dull efforts are 'cult' movies when they often fail to be actually funny is one typically defensive position. But, admittedly, so is that assertion. Jokes are wholly subjective (stop me if you've heard this one!) because the essence of a good joke is not just about timing. From the muddle of its 007-styled title-sequence, to a painfully dim ending, **ASHENS AND THE QUEST FOR THE GAMECHILD** (DVD/Blu-ray, 14 July) is a witless compendium of irrelevant 'gags' that only remind viewers how geeky irreverence is no guarantee of amusement value.

Directed by Riyad Barmania (co-writer of the dreary *Elfie Hopkins*), this parcel of undercooked tripe results in a spew of postmodern quirks, deadweight ironies, and insipid performances of several boring characters. Even a novelty of animated dream-sequences can't save it. I found lead play-actor Stuart Ashen (who apparently runs a web channel that 'reviews' tat) is only as hilarious as having a wasp crawl up my nose. The final sting is that this idiotic homegrown twaddle lacks even the alleged charm of Larry Blamire's gormless American flicks!

What would you do to regain your youth? Rutger Hauer recycles

a *Tron/Total Recall* combo as the framing story for another tournament-of-death scenario in **RPG – REAL PLAYING GAME** (DVD, 8 September). Wealthy old folks wake up in young bodies and this lost-amnesiacs' slasher-mystery unfolds with much bitter cynicism, and paranoia that mushrooms in twisted hearts/vacant minds in search of identity. "Now, we have another hour to kill." There's less intrigue than *Cluedo* murders. It eschews the flashy anti-heroics of *Gamer*. This makes *Hunger Games* seem like a Shakespearean drama.



Comicbook parody and freak show, **HK: FORBIDDEN SUPERHERO** (DVD/Blu-ray, 15 September) mixes smutty comedy sketches/absurd aggro like *Kick-Ass* meets *Spider-Man*, Japanese style. With used knickers for his mask, teenage hero Kyosuke gains homo-erotic powers and so hardly needs any clothes. "He's a pervert, but...he's so cool!" Gay panic is enough to disable gangs of school bullies, and prancing fu takes care of the rest. Even when the foes are sleazier than Pervert Mask, this remains a po-faced, eccentric farce that's just ridiculously kitsch and tacky instead of very amusing.

## LATE ARRIVALS

**FRANK** (DVD/Blu-ray, 15 September). Wonderful offbeat comedy inspired by Chris Sievey's character Frank Sidebottom. [AC]

# MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

LUCY

TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF  
EXTINCTION

THE PURGE: ANARCHY

DAWN OF THE PLANET  
OF THE APES

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR  
DRAGON 2

GUARDIANS OF THE  
GALAXY

HERCULES

SIN CITY: A DAME TO  
KILL FOR

THE ANOMALY

EARTH TO ECHO

VAMPIRE ACADEMY

THE ROVER

THE CONGRESS

MOOD INDIGO



**T**he average sf film only uses 10% of its imagination, and the average lead only 10% of her stellar mass. So third cheer in a row for Scarlett Johansson, unlikely first lady of posthuman cinema, who has cashed in her Marvel profile to lend bankability to three wildly out-there sf films that would have struggled in various ways to happen without her, while at the same time giving her things to do that small pouty blondes with leather-friendly booties rarely get the opportunity to explore in today's Hollywood, and to thumb her perfect nose at her Marvel paymasters' timidity over lady leads. Luc Besson has been making films about female superheroes since before anyone even noticed, from *Nikita* and *Joan of Arc* to *Adèle Blanc-Sec* and *The Lady*; and as in the best Besson, there's a cheery rubbing of audience noses in the differences between Hollywood narrative and the things you can get away with if you feel sufficient contempt for American rules, as Lucy finds herself an American plunged terrifyingly into the middle of a Besson film, where brilliantly-cast gangs of heavies in immaculate black suits speak unsubtitled Korean in unsubtitled Shanghai for no reason we ever need to know, and anyone can get blown away on a whim. But as the

progress bar of her intelligence rises, she comes to master her Besson narrative environment, throwing cars round Paris like a native and blowing strangers away as her humanity falls, quite poignantly, away.

Before rushing to judgment on **LUCY**'s daft endorsement of the 10% brain myth, it's important to remind ourselves that Besson is not an idiot, and indeed only came to filmmaking after the teenage diving accident that derailed his original destiny as a marine biologist. (The laugh-out-loud line in *Lucy* about dolphins is partly a wistful wink to that lost road.) The fictional drug CPH4 is based on some surprisingly well-informed bluffing from genuine research in embryonic development and the links between hormones such as estradiol and early-weeks neural development. *Lucy*'s intentions can be read from the fact that it was written in Comic Sans, with a prefatory note explaining that the first half-hour is *Léon*, the second *Inception*, and the last *2001*. And sure enough, the film changes up through the genres from a bunch of Korean thugs to spinning-room stunts to a whited-out state of transcendence where Lucy gets her star child on and graduates from girlfriend to God. Now that's a character arc.

*2001* famously started out as a narrated film, from which





Kubrick only removed the earnest Clarkean voiceover in a three-week editing frenzy before the press show. Besson's less radical, but still audacious, solution is to retain the great slabs of portentous exporrhea intact, and simply cast twinkly voice-of-God Morgan Freeman to try and carry them off. (You may think he goes on a bit, but there was a *lot* more in the script.) In the end, though, the film has had to dial back a bit on the transcendence and compromise more than it intended with the 10% audience. Early drafts got rid of the drug-lord plot early on, as Lucy (quite reasonably) loses interest in banal plot goals like revenge, and it was a comparatively late decision to keep the shootout action going as background noise to the final sequence, which for some will be the point where the film gives up, and for others where it really takes off. As the lady says, "Life was given to us a billion years ago. What have we done with it?" That's not an opening line you hear a lot in American film.

If Besson is an easy target for scorn, it's easier still to take a pop at Michael Bay, so let's briefly recap why he's a filmmaker nobody should underestimate or dismiss. First if least importantly, you don't get to be the apex predator in global blockbuster cinema on 10% of your movie brain. Bay is a very skilful and experienced filmmaker who (let's remember) sat in the same classes at Wesleyan as Joss Whedon, and has built up a body of work, an audience, and a profit stream in blockbuster cinema to which *The Avengers*, for one, is ineradicably indebted. The *Transformers* films have established the despised and sneered-at genre of Japanese toy franchises as a four-quadrant package which has united the world and set the bar for photorealistic effects in mecha cinema, as well as demonstrating how to reach out beyond the domestic audience to make films for the world in a post-American age. The line in **TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION** about the Chinese

"These are not stupid films. It's true that *Age of Extinction* is a film about giant robots riding giant robot dinosaurs, which frankly should be sufficient warrant to exist in itself"

central government's staunchness in the face of the Decepticon threat to Hong Kong may knock western audiences back in their seats a bit, but there's a reason you heard it first in a *Transformers* film, and why local martial-arts stars are so prominently featured in supporting roles.

And these are not stupid films. It's true that *Age of Extinction* is a film about giant robots riding giant robot dinosaurs, which frankly should be sufficient warrant to exist in itself. But it also happens to be the one Hollywood film to predict the rise of ISIS, in an inverted but completely obvious allegory under which America is postwar Iraq and the Autobot pullout has left a weak and compromised government exposed to a new and genocidal



Deception insurgency. Into the middle of this stumbles Mark Wahlberg's backwoods shed mechanic, scavenging an old truck which turns out to be injured warrior Optimus Prime, and thereby makes his family a target for absolutely everyone, when all he wanted to do was protect his family. It's a powerful evocation of the conditions of civilians left to pick up the pieces in a former war zone between great powers, on to which are projected the most primal of American emotions about the right to bear arms against anyone who looks interested at your daughter. Watch out especially for the CIA unit called Cemetery Wind. That's a bowel condition you really do not want.

**B**ay's often-forgotten sideline in low-budget horror production has unleashed another dubious profit monkey in James DiMonaco's **THE PURGE: ANARCHY**, a swift followup to last year's manipulative home-invasion nasty about a 2020 US where all crime is permitted one night a year. Where the first film was a single-location siege movie

centred on one house and family, this second instalment opens the action out to follow three initially separate stories through the streets of an entire city under lockdown while painty-faced Purge people roam the streets letting the American id run free with semi-automatics. As the stories converge and the vigilante lead finds his priorities challenged as he becomes responsible for a tag-along party of innocents, the film moves from a moderately interesting exploration of the franchise's thought-experiment world to an increasingly silly plot about posh folks playing most dangerous game with the poor and big government using people power to crush the people. Like the first *Purge*, it recognises in its heart that the premise is beyond dumb, and its solemn message that tooling up and locking down are a dance of death is undercut by the exploitation of precisely the licensed discharge of fear and violence that the film deplores as a mechanism of utopianisation. But they can always say that that's the point: that the reason these films make you sick to your stomach is because they invite you to

"Bay's often forgotten sideline in low-budget horror production has unleashed another dubious profit monkey in James DiMonaco's *The Purge: Anarchy*"

identify with the same class terror and gun-happy vigilantism that they're insisting are a disease of the American soul. Be glad it's just one night a year.

**D**AWN OF THE PLANET OF THE APES takes a more thoughtful, but perhaps not less exploitative, address to some of the same issues of gun control and original sin, in a ten-years-on sequel where *Rise's* simian flu has wiped out most of humanity while Caesar's apetopia in Muir Woods thrives, only for contact with a surviving human community in San Francisco to precipitate a string of distrust and betrayals that bring violence to the apes' forest dream and hawk/dove factional splits on both sides pull the bispecies world to the precipice of war. As has become well known, Matt Reeves' film is itself the survivor of an apocalyptic extinction





"It's an impressive achievement, breaking ground with the use of performance capture on location, and with the ape leads acting the B-list humans off the screen"

event, after *Rise* director Rupert Wyatt's abrupt departure took the original storyline with him, and new screenwriter Mark Bombback found himself promoted from a couple of weeks' polishing to creating a completely new film from nothing for the same release date. So instead of a tale from further down the timeline, we rewind to the moment of *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, when the famous slogan "Ape shall never kill ape" is put to the test with the moral right to inherit the earth as the prize, and a terrestrial fantasy of first contact plays out some simplistic but resonant issues of human and animal nature against our ominous franchise foreknowledge of where all this will end up.

Technically, it's an impressive achievement, breaking ground with the use of performance capture on location, and with the ape leads acting the B-list

humans off the screen. The price that's been paid for all this is a crudely mechanical plot about tree-huggers versus warlords, fathers and sons, and a climactic mano-a-mano atop a skyscraper with a bomb at the bottom, all played out by characters whose personality and motivation rarely rises beyond paper-cut puppets. Viewers of *Dawn* from countries where firearm ownership is not a given will also be disappointed by its subordination of thoughtful questions about original sin and the origins of aggression to parochial issues of gun control – even if the film rather aptly kicks off with the TSG Entertainment ident of Odysseus shooting through the axes, having earlier removed all arms from the hall on the reasoning that "iron by itself leads a man on". But it's certainly a more adventurous film than the one Fox would have made if they hadn't been in release-date panic mode; and despite the spectacle and the set pieces, it's surprisingly slow-paced for a summer blockbuster, which makes it all the more encouraging that audiences don't seem particularly to have minded.

**H**OW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON 2 is pretty much the same film, with heavily-armed militarists threatening a utopia of sanctuary wildlife and overthrowing a tentatively-established interspecies cooperation, until dragons together strong. Following on from the bridging *Legends* trilogy of shorts, we catch up with Hiccup and his fellow dragonriders five years on, the island of Berk now an eco-paradise of dragons and humans in soaring aerial 3D harmony, till Djimon Hounsou's psycho warlord (who is, as ever, "building an army") introduces a kaiju-sized alpha dragon to the mix, and singing to Gerry Butler's chiefly port-folio: "I'll swim and sail on savage seas with ne'er a fear of drowning / And gladly ride the waves of life if you will marry me." (Amazingly, Shane McGowan wrote that.) But it's all part of Hiccup's education in manhood and sense of identity: "I was so afraid of becoming my dad, mostly because I never could." He certainly can't do the accent, though at least he's better than Cate Blanchett, who makes the very unfortunate mistake of trying.



**E**ven now that **GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY** has beaten *Apes*, *Transformers*, and *Dragon* to the top of the summer charts, it's still not at all clear why this film exists. A purely genetic narrative would point to its origins in Marvel Studios' previously little-noticed in-house writing programme, which farms a bullpen of early-career screenwriters on two-year contracts to develop a secret library of scripts from Marvel's vast back catalogue of intellectual property, with occasional furloughs to do cheap and uncredited polish work on *Thor* scripts. As is now well known, Nicole Perlman was a lone female among these indentured labourers, who got the gig from her Richard Feynman biodrama *The Challenger* (which might easily be confused with the subsequent BBC biodrama *Challenger* about Richard Feynman, but for the fact that Perlman's name appears nowhere on it), and politely refused the female-led properties dangled to her in favour of the recently rebooted *Guardians*. The film was greenlit, and the script promptly whisked out of her hands for a series of other writers to work on, ending up with James

Gunn rewriting the whole thing anyway. But none of this explains why *Guardians* was allowed to go forward in the first place, which may be something to do with Marvel's need to reassure Disney in 2009 that their four billion was buying something more than a yellowing portfolio of fifty-year-old characters and storylines on which they'd failed to improve or build in the half-century since, and that the present-day comics business was still an engine for heavily franchisable properties that could generate entire suites of collectible character toys at the snap of an opposable thumb. It won't have hurt that Disney were able to take the opportunity to test the waters for their much bigger investment in the risky revival of a space-opera brand at a time when the genre was all but extinct. Of course it's spun as Marvel showing new confidence in their less familiar properties, in the expansive supercluster starfield that stands as the comics universe's backdrop, and in the power of the naked brand to pull audiences into something they've never heard of, just because, you know, Marvel. But don't think there isn't a bottom line in there.

*"Guardians is a pleasantly disarming, if surprisingly timid and old-school, space opera that occasionally would be quite exciting if it wasn't apologising for itself"*

At any rate *Guardians* is a pleasantly disarming, if surprisingly timid and old-school, space opera that occasionally would be quite exciting if it wasn't apologising for itself and winking so much of the time. The 2008 Abnett/Lanning *Guardians* comics reboot came as the accidental detritus of the Annihilation event, leaving a randomised superteam of minor figures (plus the very non-minor Adam Warlock, who has sensibly fled the coop here) to repopulate what had hitherto been a far-future team brand. Their wild storylines, heavy with timeline-twisting Marvel metaphysics, have been pretty much ignored here for a much more conventional story, insistently retro and ironic, rooted in a model of space opera that remains stuck in 1983, when Peter Quill was abducted from Earth and his cultural lexicon never since updated. It's a shame that the favourite thing in the first new space opera in years is a talk-





"Sin City: A Dame to Kill For takes us back to the dark inside of Frank Miller's head, to find that even the few light switches that used to work are now broken"

ing tree, but Marvel knew what they were signing. Gunn has been making versions of this film for a while, right back to the millennial dawn of modern superhero cinema; the year of Bryan Singer's *X-Men* also inconspicuously threw up Gunn's *The Specialists*, an eyewateringly cheap film about the off-duty lives of a *Guardians*-like low-ranking superteam with dumb powers, lashings of body paint, and hit-and-miss character banter. The old Troma hand has sharpened his tools since those days, but he was never going to be the man to charge with a sense of wonder; the plot is surely the last we will ever tolerate of those Marvel boilerplate numbers about chasing an Infinity Stone around for an hour and a bit till something woah-sized falls out of the sky in the third act.

Over in a comics universe next door, Brett Ratner's **HERCULES** has boldly chosen to

honour the memory of the late Steve Moore by ignoring his final wishes and plastering his name all over this Rock-headed adaptation of his comic series *Hercules: The Thracian Wars*, while still not paying Moore's estate a penny. Even before this indignity, Steve's mentee Alan Moore was urging a boycott, and while the film can seem entertaining enough as a big-budget, low-forehead extended episode of *Xena*, it's certainly not the memorial one of British comics' mightiest bronze-age heroes would have wished. (That would be *Unearthing*, Alan Moore's psychogeographical biography from 2006, particularly in its Crook&Flail audio incarnation.) *The Thracian Wars* wasn't Steve's best work in comics, but it had a lot of fun with the conceit of a league of extraordinary gentlefolk recruited from the heroic names of pre-Trojan myth cycles, with Herc heading up a super-team of Theban and Calydonian celebrities in a euhemerised age of myth. Ratner's version has taken bits of this, randomised the characterisations, scrambled the plot, and jollied it up with a jokier tone, while cheerfully shredding much of Moore's careful regard

for sources and canon. Despite a Greek co-writer, Amphiarus and Sitalces can no longer pronounce their own names, and the opening scene is captioned "358 B.C." without anyone apparently noticing there was probably meant to be a 1 on the front of that. Dwayne and McShane seem heartily amused by the whole thing, but when Herc introduces his buddies as "Atalanta of Scythia, Amphiarus of Argus, Autolycus of Sparta", you can hear the distant sound of Steve Moore's ashes spinning on the wind.

**SIN CITY: A DAME TO KILL FOR** takes us back to the dark inside of Frank Miller's head after nine years' respite, to find that even the few light switches that used to work are now broken. This second tour is a perplexing narrative space, in which old faces who ought to be dead (Mickey Rourke, Bruce Willis) play alongside old faces who aren't (Jessica Alba, Rosario Dawson, Powers Boothe) and new faces playing old ones (Josh Brolin as Clive Owen, Dennis Haysbert as Michael Clarke Duncan) at variously later or earlier stages of their timeline, some of them so completely warped by time that

they might as well be completely new characters, while new new faces Eva Green and Joe Gordon-Levitt try to out-noir the noiest of them with still more preposterously overblown character arcs that it's fair to expect will not end well for either. The film as a whole is set in a kind of *Pulp Fiction* hole in the first film where the Willis/Alba story has happened but the Rourke one hasn't, so that anyone reliant on nine-year-old memories is going to find themselves as frazzled as Rourke's punchdrunk vigilante Marv, who can't remember why he's beating up whoever he's beating up tonight, but knows they must have deserved it. The stories are pretty infantile, the underlying misogyny trumped by the overarching misanthropy, and the sadism as stupid as ever. The old hands are better than the new at making their characters seemactable, even if the indomitable Green gives it her heaving best as the titular dame: "a witch, a predator, destroying men sometimes for profit, sometimes for power, sometimes for sport." But even old Dwight and Nancy are tainted now by long marinading in Miller's imagination: "This rotten town," she sums up. "It soils everybody." The film has now tanked in the States but cleaned up in Russia, so for worse or better we may not have seen the last.

**T**hirty years ago, when Syd Field's three-act model of screenplay structure was starting to establish itself as the industry paradigm, Columbia University's Frank Daniel fought back with a model that broke a film down into eight "sequences" of ten to fifteen minutes, corresponding to the reels of early cinema. Now Noel Clarke seems to have been studying the sequence model in his latest exercise in shoestring Brit-skiff **THE ANOMALY**, a bodyjacking thriller whose gim-



mick is that the hero only wakes to consciousness and ownership of his body for 9'47" intervals while the system reboots after a crash. The rest of the time he's possessed by Brian Cox, which is a bit of a hardcore thespian challenge for our Noel but luckily happens mostly in insterstitial downtime, as the film is constructed of a series of ten-minute sequences during which the hero has to do his *Source Code* thing before the window closes. The idea is cool, but the execution risible, with diabolical performances and dialogue, cheesy slo-mo fight sequences, and a scheme-chain of villainy that swiftly spirals off into the outer reaches of absurdity: "The acid between the sheets is gradually spreading towards your son's body. It's a little much, I know, but I have a penchant for theatrics." (Everyone: oh no you don't! Villain: oh yes I do! Repeat and fade into oblivion.)

**E**ARTH TO ECHO is a found-footage homage to *ET* with a dash of *Super 8*, as a group of ten-year-olds rescue a spacewrecked alien owlbot and go on a geocaching quest to return him to his ship in defiance of the government's men in orange who want to do horrid things to our heroes' little space buddy. It's a film with little obvious reason to be than the technical challenge of

**"Earth to Echo is a found-footage homage to *ET* with a dash of *Super 8*, as a group of ten-year-olds rescue a spacewrecked alien owlbot"**

finding a child-friendly version of a film genre otherwise associated with scary movies, which on the whole it does with sufficient ingenuity to pass the time. The kids are all rather good, and seem to have been cast for their willingness to go all in with the on-screen crying; and there's quite a sweet framing plot about the disruption of childhood friendships as parents move away from town, and how the universe gives you ways to keep distant friends close. Particularly affecting is a *Boyhood*-style final scene where we revisit the young cast a year later, and see that growth spurts and breaking voices haven't changed the bond between them despite their months apart. I'm not sure that happens in life, but it's a nice bit of manipulation.

**V**AMPIRE ACADEMY begins with a carcrash, which in hindsight may have been a bit of a hostage. Richelle Mead's sextet-and-counting about a high school in Montana for trainee bloodsuckers and their half-blood guardians is a long way from the bottom of the YA barrel, with an attractive focus on the intensity





**"Vampire Academy is one of those fiascos that restore your joy in films that are able to achieve that perfect balance of awfulness and brilliance"**

and resilience of teenage girls' friendships, and some ingeniously overmythologised use of traditional Romanian vampire lore. For teen-movie afics, this film version is a bit of a superhero teamup in itself: a decades-overdue collaboration between *Mean Girls* and *Freaky Friday* director Mark Waters and his screenwriter big brother Daniel, who wrote *Heathers* as well as *Batman Returns* and a wonderful unproduced early *Catwoman*, since which, well, not so much. It should be a can't-miss, but it became clear as UK release dates approached, whipped past, and receded in the rear mirror that something was not at all well, and after the most fleeting of theatrical appearances it's shuffled straight off to stream and rent.

This is either a huge shame or a gift to humankind, as *Vampire Academy* is one of those endlessly rewatchable fiascos that restore your joy in films that are able to achieve that perfect balance of awfulness and brilliance. *Vampire Academy* is a UK/Romanian co-production, which isn't something you see every day and may explain a series of curious references to a

Romanian delegation to the school which never materialises, at least in the version seen. It was made entirely in the home counties, a part of the world not known for its insistent resemblance to Montana; St Vladimir's is played by Charterhouse, and the local mall, which includes a prominently visible Superdrug, is unmistakably Brent Cross Shopping Centre, while the vampires are mostly played by a distinctly low-fat cream of such young British acting talent as hasn't already been skimmed by every other franchise in the industry. The film does, however, have one absolute killer asset in its star Zoey Deutch, who comes across as yet another of those 26-year-olds preposterously cast as a teenager, whom you can't quite place but who is thumpingly familiar from something you saw years ago when she was young. In fact it turns out that she's her character's age, and that the reason she's naggingly familiar, effortlessly charismatic, and has the comic timing of someone twice her age is that her mom is Lea Thompson and that stuff is genetic as all hell. But the spice in the recipe is that Deutch's sassy vamp-guardian is paired, catastrophically and yet also wonderfully, with Australian TV actress Lucy Fry as the teenage vampire-princess bestie she's sworn to protect, and Fry, bless her, is a proud alumn of

the Rosie Huntington-Whiteley school of the dramatic arts. I can't really describe it. It's like watching a panther eating a Toblerone. The thing is, they genuinely do lift each other, so that by the end of the film you can't remember which one is wonderful and which is terrible, or why this isn't the most fun you've ever had.

**D**own under in Fry's homeland, David Michôd's **THE ROVER** positions itself in the grand tradition of Australian post-apocalyptic westerns, as world-weary badass Guy Pearce pursues the bestids who stole his vintage Holden Commodore across half of South Australia from one Tarantino-inflected interaction to the next, with Robert Pattinson in twitchy tow as the baby brother with learning difficulties that target Scoot McNairy abandoned for dead. Pearce turns in a career top-five performance, right from the wonderful early moment where a sudden sense of absolute purpose appears in his hitherto-dead eyes; while even Pattinson is certainly doing something in very great quantity, even if acting isn't quite what you'd choose to call it. The event ten years earlier, known only as "the collapse", seems to be an economic rather than a natural or technological catastrophe, and is fairly peripheral to the film's central puzzle of what the car means to Pearce and how it's tied to his dead man's view of the world. Many will find the answer a bit of a groaner when it comes in the final scene, undoing much of the good work the film has done till then; but Michôd has said when called out on it that that's of course the whole point, and certainly the signs have long been there that Pearce's behaviour is diagnostic of a deeper and more systemic moral damage that just being a bit moody and good with a handgun. As Pattinson puts it



in his coarse-acting Southern retard drawl, "Not everythin' has to be about sump'n" – particularly in a world where order, justice, civilisation, morality, and meaning no longer exist, for reasons all the characters know but nobody is in a hurry to tell us.

**A**ri Folman's **THE CONGRESS** takes an unusual approach to adapting Lem's *The Futurological Congress*, about a kind of Worldcon on hallucinogens that gets overrun by terrorists, by making the novel just one mezzanine level in a bunker of rabbit-hole realities from which the film has to find its way back to the surface. Lem's regular comic adventurer Ijon Tichy is here substituted by an actress sharing the name, body, and CV of Robin Wright, who in a long prologue sequence allows herself to be professionally replaced by a *Simone*-style digital avatar, and then twenty years in the future slips inconspicuously into a Congress where everyone appears as a Fleischeresque animation, thanks to the compulsory ingestion of low-level hallucinogens at the border of the "animation zone". But once inside, she drinks some spiked tapwater and falls into a much deeper pit of weirdness, from which she eventually awakens into a future world in which everyone now lives in a drug-made consensual hallucination overlaid on a grim red-pill dystopia, and her quest takes a different and more poignant personal turn.

Everything about this film is as insane as it sounds. Israeli writer-director Folman is best known for his Flash-animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir*, about the Sabra-Shabilla refugee camp massacres in the 1983 Lebanon war. *The Congress* is a fiercely determined attempt to do something as far from that as possible: teeming classical



animation, a story of American futures rather than Middle Eastern history, shuffling through genres and mindstates like in-show wardrobe changes. But for those who know Folman's earlier work, the obsessions sing through: the madness and unreality of the surface of the world, which can be broken at any moment by the detonation of a bomb, the fall of shell, the sudden sound of copters overhead. Almost none of it works at all in any normally recognisable sense, but it's a film of phenomenal strangeness and power which has, among other things, recognised an unexpected mirror of darkness in Lem's satire, and stays with you longer than is easily explained. The French got it over a year ago, and I'm still not sure they've recovered.

**B**ack in the Parisian metropolis of the surreal, **MOOD INDIGO** is the third film version of Boris Vian's unfilmable 1947 novel *L'Écume des jours* – itself an untranslatable text translated three times into English, but never the modern classic it's been in French. The novel follows two couples from frothy, surrealised, language-popping romance to darkness and desolation as tragic turns intrude on the cartoon silliness and word jazz: Audrey Tautou develops a growth on her lung, Gad Elmaleh is destroyed by

**"Mood Indigo is the third film version of Boris Vian's unfilmable 1947 novel *L'Écume des jours*"**

addiction, and both are reduced to destitution and final tragedy as the couples' resources burn through and the light, joy, and colour drizzle out of their lives; and though the growth is a waterlily and the addiction is to the works of jazz philosopher "Jean-Sol Partre", the arc into darkness is the more powerful for the adolescent whimsy from which it descends. This latest version being a Michel Gondry film, the visual canvas bubbles with strangeness and the characters (who with hindsight one can see were always hovering in the background of his *Human Nature*, *Eternal Sunshine*, and *Science of Sleep*) travel a path from romantic optimism to existential melancholia that systematically and hauntingly deconstruct the initial whimsy and music-video popping candy for the eye. It's about as French as a film can get, and undoubtedly a challenge to viewers whose filmic tastebuds have been burned out by the refined sugars and saturated fats of the Hollywood narrative diet. But it's the only film in this pile of fourteen with no guns, no carchases, and no edged weapons. If that seems odd, perhaps we should use more of our brains.





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